

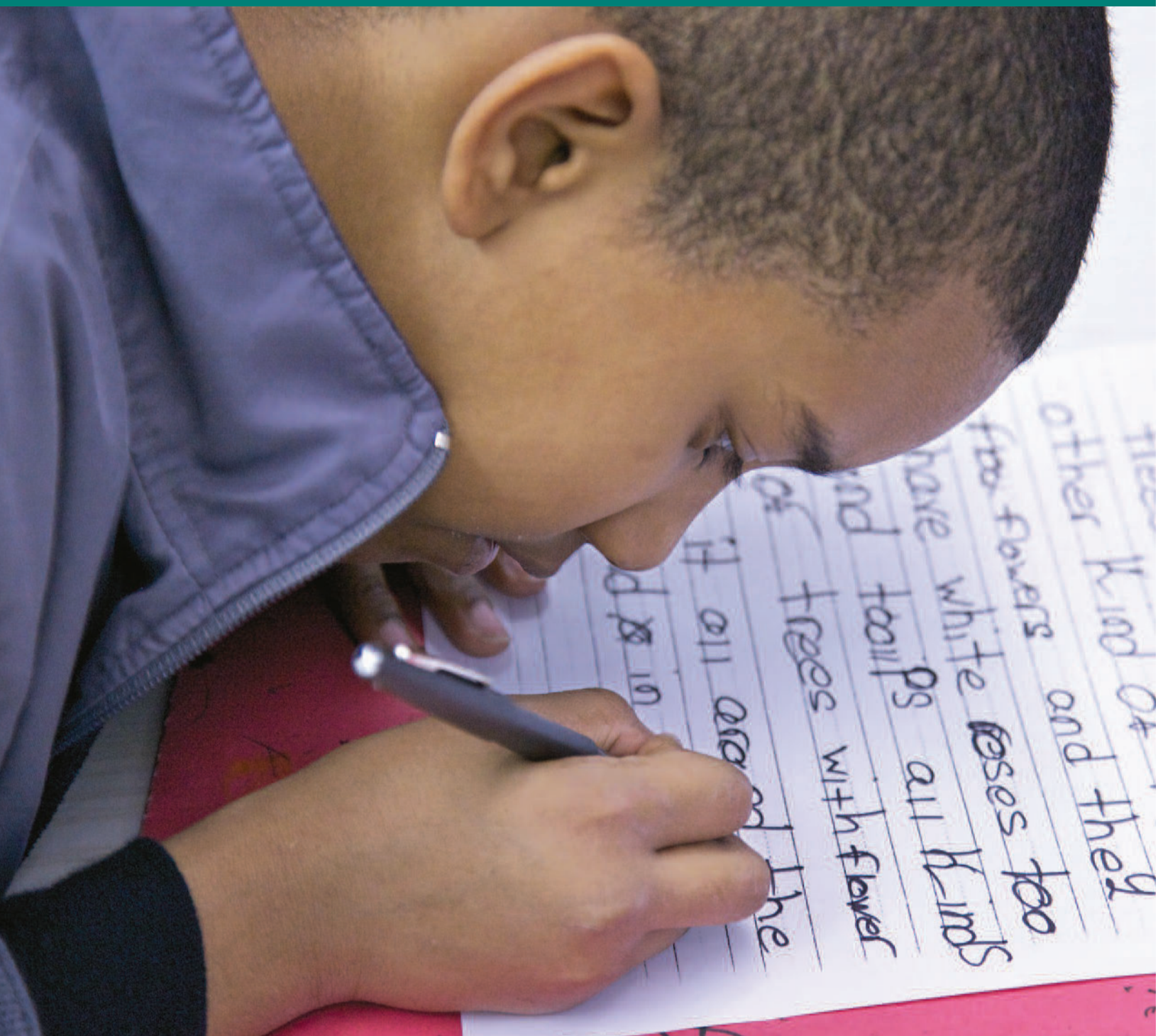


COMMON CORE READING & WRITING WORKSHOP

# A CURRICULAR PLAN FOR The Writing Workshop

GRADE

5



LUCY CALKINS AND COLLEAGUES FROM  
THE READING AND WRITING PROJECT

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HEINEMANN  
DEDICATED TO TEACHERS™



A CURRICULAR PLAN FOR  
**The Writing Workshop**  
**Grade 5**

Common Core Reading and Writing Workshop

Lucy Calkins  
*and Colleagues from*  
*The Reading and Writing Project*



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# Overview of the Year for Fifth-Grade Writers

SEPTEMBER	UNIT 1: Memoir
OCTOBER	UNIT 2: The Interpretive Essay: <i>Exploring and Defending Big Ideas about Life and Texts</i>
NOVEMBER	UNIT 3: Informational Writing: <i>Building on Expository Structures to Write Lively, Voice-Filled Nonfiction Picture Books</i>
DECEMBER	UNIT 4: Research-Based Argument Essays
JANUARY/FEBRUARY	UNIT 5: Historical Fiction or Fantasy Fiction
FEBRUARY/MARCH	UNIT 6: Poetry
MARCH/APRIL	UNIT 7: Literary Essay and Test Preparation in Writing
MAY	UNIT 8: Informational Writing: <i>Reading, Research, and Writing in the Content Areas</i>
JUNE	UNIT 9: Historical Fiction or Fantasy Fiction

This curricular calendar details the Reading and Writing Project’s proposal for a Common Core State Standards–aligned writing curriculum for fifth-grade classrooms. This document has been extensively revised since 2010–2011, and the document will be revised a year from now, in spring of 2012, to reflect all the new



learning that this community of practice does in the upcoming year. Always, the Reading and Writing Project's Curricular Calendar outlines, for each K–8 grade, a yearlong course of study that is part of a K–8 spiral curriculum. Fashioned with input from hundreds of teachers, coaches, and principals, this curriculum stands on three decades of work in thousands of schools and especially on the shoulders of Calkins' *Units of Study for Teaching Writing, Grades 3–5* (Heinemann 2006), a series of books that conveys the minilessons that Calkins and coauthors gave while teaching many of these units of study.

This curriculum responds directly to the requirements spelled out in the new Common Core State Standards for fifth grade. It is also based on the New York State ELA exam and standards; if you teach in a different state, you will need to adjust this sequence of work according to your state's assessments.

Comprising units of study that tend to be a month in duration, the fifth-grade curriculum calendar offers instruction in narrative, argument, informational, and poetic writing that fits into a spiral curriculum for work that crosses students' school experience. This instruction enables students to work in each of these fundamental modes with increasing sophistication and with decreasing reliance on scaffolds. For example, first graders write Small Moment stories by recalling an event and retelling it "across their fingers," whereas third graders plot narratives against the graphic organizer of a timeline or a story mountain, revising the narratives so that beginnings and endings relate to what the story is *really* about. In a similar manner, from kindergarten through eighth grade, students become progressively more capable of writing opinion (or argument) texts. In first grade, for example, children make and substantiate claims in persuasive letters; by third grade, they learn to use expository structures in order to persuade. By fifth grade, students analyze informational texts to understand conflicting points of view and write argument essays in which they take a stand, drawing on evidence from research. Because the units of study are designed to build upon one another, a teacher at any one grade level can always use the write-ups for preceding and following grades to develop some knowledge for ways to support writers who especially struggle and those who especially need enrichment. This sometimes takes a bit of research because units in, say, writing informational texts will not always bear the same title (these might be called "all-about books" at one grade and "research reports" at another), nor will these units necessarily be taught at a consistent time of the year.

While these curricular calendars support units that vary according to grade level, allowing students to work with increasing sophistication and independence over time, it is also true that all of the units aim to teach writers to write with increasing skill. Eudora Welty once said, "Poetry is the school I went to in order to learn to write prose," and indeed, work in any particular genre can advance writing skills that are applicable across genres. Interestingly, the essential skills of great writers remain consistent whether the writer is seven years old, seventeen—or seventy, for that matter. All of us try again and again to write with focus, detail, grace, structure, clarity, insight, honesty, and increasing control of conventions, and all of us do so by rehearsing, planning, studying exemplar texts, drafting, rereading, revising, reimagining, and editing.

There is nothing inevitable about this particular way of unrolling a sequence of writing units of study. There are lots of other ways teachers *could* plan their writing curriculum. We lay out this one course of study for fifth graders because we believe it is a wise trajectory, one that stands on the shoulders of the work these children will have done in the preceding year and one that will enable them to meet the Common Core State Standards for fifth grade and that sets them up for sixth grade. The other reason we lay out this single line of work is that the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project's conference days and coach-courses cannot provide close support for hundreds of different iterations of a writing curriculum. For the schools that are working closely with us, the Project's writing-related conference days for fifth-grade teachers will support this particular line of work. Conference days usually precede the units of study by at least a week, if not by two weeks.

Many teachers make curricular maps based on these units, often following the *Understanding by Design* format, and of course teachers invent minilessons that support these units. During the 2011–2012 school year, we will create a website where these and other resources can be shared. You can learn about this resource on our current website, [www.readingandwritingproject.com](http://www.readingandwritingproject.com). On this website, you will find a bibliography of books that align to these units, most of which are available through Booksource.

Although we're excited about this curricular calendar, we also know that nothing matters more in your teaching than your own personal investment in it. It is critical that you modify this plan as you see fit so that you feel a sense of ownership over your teaching and so that your teaching reflects what you know about your students. We do encourage you, however, to work in sync with colleagues from fifth grade (and perhaps fourth grade) so that your teaching can benefit from the group's cumulative knowledge. Ideally, this will mean that your grade-level meetings can be occasions for swapping minilessons, planning lessons in ways that inform your teaching, assessing and glorying in children's work, and planning ways to respond to their needs.

## Changes from Last Year to This Year

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There has never been more work invested in a curricular calendar than the work invested in this year's fifth-grade calendar. The changes between last year and this year are too extensive to detail in this overview. Many of the changes are the result of the adoption of the Common Core State Standards and the new attentiveness this has brought to informational and argument writing.

The fall of the year sees a greater emphasis on idea-based writing. The first unit of study this year is on memoir, and you'll see that there is an emphasis within the unit on harnessing narrative writing to a reflective stance. We want to teach students, in this unit, to really use writing to analyze their lives and the implications of pivotal moments in defining them. The second unit of study is a new unit on interpretive essays, in which we teach writers to be inspired by literature and to bring literature

into their lives. This version of the literary essay has caused great excitement among classrooms that piloted it, and we look forward to seeing fifth graders rise to the intellectual levels demanded here.

The third unit is also new. It is a unit of study on information writing. It is closely aligned with Common Core State Standards for informational reading as well as writing, and we hope to see children's nonfiction reading skills as well as writing skills improve as they learn to write dense, complex nonfiction. It is followed by another new unit of study, on research-based argument essays. In this unit, students will research a topic of interest, learning to evaluate texts not only for information but for the perspective and bias they offer on a topic. Then they will weave this knowledge into an essay in which the writers stake a claim on a topic and substantiate that claim with research. You may also want to adapt this unit for science classrooms. The unit descriptions for both of these units are almost completely new, and the units have been carefully designed to take students to the level of expectation described in the Common Core State Standards.

These two months are then followed by a month on writing historical fiction or fantasy—you may choose one genre to teach now and save the other for the end of the year, aligning your unit with a parallel study in the same genre in reading. Both fantasy and historical fiction offer readers and writers the opportunity to work with complex texts. After this—poetry! This year we offer a new take on this unit, recommending that you capitalize on the thematic text set work that is happening in reading workshop and teach students to create thematic poetry anthologies. Then onward to literary essays, which are aligned with preparation for the New York State ELA.

We're suggesting a content-area reading and writing unit in May. Students will again write informational texts, but whereas the first time they did this in the fall, they wrote on topics of individual expertise, now they will write on a whole-class research topic.

Finally, we end the year with a return to genre fiction: the version that you chose not to teach in January.

We are aware that you and your colleagues may well make choices that are different than those we present here, and we welcome those choices. A year from now, we'd love to hear your suggestions for variations on this theme! If you devise a new unit of study that you are willing to share with other teachers, please send it to Lucy Calkins at [contact@readingandwritingproject.com](mailto:contact@readingandwritingproject.com).

## Assessment

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Who was it who said, "We inspect what we respect"? It will be important for you to assess your students' growth in writing using a number of different lenses to notice what students can do. The Project recommends you use the Continua for Assessing Narrative, Informational, and Argument Writing, three tools we have developed and piloted to track student growth in those modes of writing. These tools are works-in-progress, and the newest versions of them are available on the RWP website



([www.readingandwritingproject.com](http://www.readingandwritingproject.com)). We invite you and your colleagues to tweak and alter the instruments to fit your purposes. We hope they can help clarify the pathways along which developing writers travel. It will certainly help you identify where a student is in a sequence of writing development and imagine realistic, doable next steps for each writer. This can make your conferring much more helpful and your teaching clearer. What began as an *assessment* tool has become an extraordinarily important *teaching* tool!

You'll want to exercise caution, however, while assessing a writer against any developmental continuum. If you bypass listening and responding to a writer, using a continuum rather than the writer's intentions as the sole source of your instruction, then the tool will have made your teaching worse, not better. Conferences always need to begin with a teacher pulling alongside a writer and asking, "What are you working on as a writer?" and "What are you trying to do?" and "What are you planning to do next?" and then the teacher needs to help the writer reach toward his or her intentions. We do this, drawing on our knowledge of good writing but also on our knowledge of how narrative, argument, and informational writers tend to develop. This is where the assessment tool can be a resource. It is crucial that your first assessments occur at the very start of your year. Your students come to you with competencies and histories as writers. You cannot teach well unless you take the time to learn what they already know and can do. Then, too, if you capture the data representing what writers can do at the very start of the year, you will be in a position to show parents and others all the ways in which they have grown as writers over the course of the year. In autumn parent-teacher conferences, bring the writing a learner did on the first day of school and contrast it with the writing he or she did just before the conference. Having the "before" picture for comparison to the "after" makes this conversation productive.

Even if you are not going to use the continua to assess growth in writing, we think you will want to get some baseline data on your writers. To do this, at the very beginning of the year, devote one full day's writing workshop—specifically, fifty minutes—to an on-demand assessment of narrative writing, another full day to an on-demand assessment of informational writing, and, ideally, a third day to a similar assessment of opinion (or argument) writing. We cannot stress enough that you must not scaffold kids' work during this assessment. Do *not* remind students of the qualities of good narrative writing, do *not* share examples of powerful texts, and definitely do *not* confer with writers. This needs to be a hands-off assessment. The exact words that we suggest you say to your students are available on the TCRWP website. You will want to repeat these on-demand assessments several times across the year, after finishing some work in that mode of writing.

If you worry that saying "Welcome to a new year; I want to begin by evaluating you" might seem harsh, you might soften this by saying that you can't wait until the end of September before having some of your students' writing to display on bulletin boards. Tell your youngsters that they won't have a chance to work long on the piece because you are so eager to have their writing up in the room, which is why they need to plan, draft, revise, and edit in just one day. The only problem with saying this is that

sometimes the idea that these pieces will be displayed has led teachers to coach into the writing, which utterly ruins the power of this as an assessment tool. The alternative is to tell students this writing is just for you to get to know them and then to store it in their portfolios.

In any case, you will want to study what your students come into the year able to do as writers—this will help you establish a baseline understanding of what your students know about the qualities of good writing. Take note of whether students have been taught and are using essential concepts. Look, for example, for evidence that children are writing *focused* texts.

## Grammar and Conventions in the Writing Curricular Calendar

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We recommend that you also take fifteen minutes at the start of the year, and periodically throughout the year, to assess students' growing control of spelling. We recommend administering Donald Bear's spelling inventory detailed in *Words Their Way*. You'll give your whole class what amounts to a spelling test, asking them to spell each of twenty-five words. In order to assess your spellers, you will need to count *not* the words correct but the *features* correct—this can take a few minutes for each child. The result is that you can channel your whole-class spelling and vocabulary instruction so that your teaching is aligned with the main needs you see across your class. It will also help you differentiate that instruction for your struggling and your strongest spellers.

You will also want to assess your writers' command over the mechanics of writing and to look at their work through the lens of the Common Core State Standards for fifth grade. You will want to understand which conventions of written language your children use with automaticity whenever they write. To understand this, look at their on-demand pieces of writing. For fifth graders, ask yourself:

- Which children do and do not tend to write in paragraphs?
- Which children do and do not include direct dialogue and use quotation marks and other punctuation associated with dialogue?
- Which children do and do not generally control their verb tenses?
- Which children do and do not generally control subject-verb agreement so that the subjects and verbs are either plural or singular?
- Which children are learning to compose complex sentences?

If you have children who do not use end punctuation roughly correctly, who do not write in paragraphs, who seem to sprinkle uppercase letters randomly throughout

their writing, or who don't yet use quotation marks to set off direct dialogue, embed instruction in all these things into your first two units of study. Establishing a long-term inquiry across the months on punctuation, capitalization, and verb usage is another way to support student growth in grammar. The hope is that many more of your students will do all of this (not perfectly, but as a matter of course) by the time of your second on-demand narrative writing assessment, probably at the end of November. You'll first teach any of these skills by embedding them into editing work (though this may be editing of just an entry), and then you'll expect the instruction to affect drafting. For example, if some students are not writing with end punctuation, teach them to read over their writing and to put a period where a thought or action ends—this will eliminate a lot of run-on sentences quickly and with a minimum of fuss. Then you can teach them to write by having a complete thought, saying it to themselves, and then writing without pausing until they reach the end of that thought, whereupon they leave a period on the page. Most students speak in sentences; they can write in them.

You will also want to be sure that your young writers are not boxed into simple sentence structures when they write. You may have students whose sentences all seem to go like this: A subject did something (perhaps to someone, with something). "I went to the park. I rode my bike. I got an ice cream. I came home." These children may feel, in their bones, that the writing lacks something, and they may try to solve the problem by linking the simple sentences with conjunctions. "I went to the park *where* I rode my bike. *Then* I got an ice cream *and* I came home." But that doesn't solve the problem. Teach these children that it helps to tell when, how, under what conditions, with what thoughts in mind, the person did the something, that is, the sentences can now look like this: "One sunny Saturday morning, I went to the park. Not long after that, I got an ice cream. Noticing the time, I hurried home." It can also help to tell *how* one did something and to tell about that activity. "I went to the park, the one down the road from me. I rode my bike quickly, round and round in circles. I got an ice cream, a double scoop chocolate that melted all over me. . . ."

For those of you wanting to further understand syntactical complexity, you may find it interesting to measure your children's syntactic maturity in writing by looking at the average length (the number of words) in the grammatical sentences that your youngsters construct. Hunt calls these the "T-units" (Hunt 1965). For instance, if a student writes: "I went to the store. I bought some candy. I met Lisa," these are three independent T-units (or simple sentences) and each one is short, with just a few words. This is simple syntax. This would still be written in T-units of four or five words if the sentences were linked with the word *and* because a T-unit is the term for a *possible* sentence, whether or not the writer punctuates it as such. On the other hand, the number of T-units would double if the sentence went like this: "When I went to the store, I bought some candy before I met Lisa." Nowhere in that sentence is there a place where a period could have been added, so this is all one T-unit comprising fourteen words. More complex syntax has more words within a T-unit. For example, the same sentence could contain yet more words per T-unit (and still be more complex):

“Yesterday I went to the store, where I bought some candy and met Lisa, my cousin and best friend.” Some writers who struggle with punctuation show complicated syntax, which is terrific. It is important for teachers to realize that correctness is not the only goal. A writer’s growing ability to write complex sentences with many words per T-unit (although don’t talk T-units with kids) should be celebrated. Writers with complex syntax will make some errors, but these writers are still far more advanced than those who use correct punctuation but rely only on simple sentences.

Children benefit most from instruction when it helps them become more powerful as they work on projects they care about, rather than studying mechanics in isolation. Usually you will first teach mechanics during editing, after children have drafted and revised a piece and are preparing it for publication. But once you have taught a skill during editing—say, the skill of dividing a piece into paragraphs—then you need to hold your students accountable for using that skill as they draft (perhaps not perfectly, but at least attempting to use it). For example, during the editing portion of Unit One, you will probably teach all students to write in paragraph structure, teaching them some of the cues for narrative paragraphs, such as when a new character enters, the time changes, or the setting changes. So then at the start of Unit Two, when youngsters are collecting entries in their notebooks, you will want to act dumbfounded if you notice one child hasn’t remembered that now he is the sort of writer who writes using paragraph indentations. Make a big fuss over this as a way to teach children that whatever they learn first during editing needs to become part of their ongoing repertoire, something they rely on all the time. Paragraphing and the punctuation involved in dialogue will fit naturally into narrative units of study. Colons and semicolons will fit into the third unit as kids will be collecting, listing, and sorting all they know.

One *crucial* point is that students will move through stages of using and confusing new constructs before they master them. This means that getting things slightly wrong can be a sign of growth. If we only “fix” students’ writing, or tell them to be “correct,” then they may revert to simpler vocabulary and sentence structure that they are sure they know how to punctuate. For instance, when students first start moving into past tense, they may not know all the forms of irregular verbs and they may confuse some. If we emphasize only accuracy, they will revert to present tense or to safe verbs they know. In the same way, they may not dare write longer sentences if they’re not sure how to punctuate them. Common stages of development include *unfamiliarity, familiarity and experimentation, using and confusing, mastery and control* (Bear 2008).

In the third unit, teach students to recall the conventions you’ve already taught, showing that they apply to non-narrative writing. Plan to revisit paragraph structure in non-narrative writing, teaching students to use paragraphs at new sections or where new ideas are introduced. Some of this can be small-group instruction. Always teach students to use all the conventions they have learned until now to be effective editors of their own and others’ writing and to write drafts that are more accurate in terms of conventions. Perhaps you will introduce the use of commas in a list, as writers typically include multiple examples in information books.

Later in the year, when students return to writing stories, might be a good time for them to write and punctuate more complicated sentences, doing so in an effort to cue readers into how to read their writing with lots of mood and expressiveness. If needed, you will want to form small groups around any convention that merits more attention. For example, in a small group you can help students who get confused distinguishing singular and plural pronouns or apostrophes for possessives and contractions.



## UNIT ONE

# Memoir

## SEPTEMBER

We know it is ambitious to suggest fifth graders begin the year with a unit of study on memoir. That's asking a lot of them—and of you. We're aware that many fifth-grade teachers may opt, instead, to use *Raising the Quality of Personal Narratives* as the first unit. If you or your kids are new to the writing workshop, we strongly recommend you postpone memoir until the end of fifth grade and, for now, follow the unit currently at the start of the fourth-grade calendar, *Raising the Quality of Personal Narratives*. You can draw on both of the first two books in the *Units of Study for Teaching Writing, Grades 3–5* in order to teach that unit. The unit we describe in this write-up, a unit on memoir, has been designed for schools in which students have worked for years on personal narrative, fiction, and essay writing. It is a heady, advanced, significant unit of study—though it is also a unit that can be done by some students in a much less advanced way and still work for them. The unit was designed as the crown jewel and the culmination of the *Units of Study*. If you elect to teach this unit at the start of fifth grade, you are sending a message to your students that says, “I’ll be expecting you to rise to new heights this year, to reach for horizons that are far more ambitious than any you have ever known before. This year will be for work that is more grown-up, more important, than anything you’ve done before.” Beginning the year with memoir means beginning the year with ambition and rigor, urging students from the get-go to draw on all they know about narrative writing, interpretation, and meaning making. It is important to note that on Webb’s hierarchy of intellectual thought, memoir writing qualifies as belonging to the highest category, since this unit requires reflection, synthesis, and critical thinking. The unit also represents an important touchstone in any Common Core State Standards-aligned



curriculum, as those standards require that 35% of students' writing be narrative. The Common Core State Standards include, in their Appendix of benchmark texts, narrative exemplar representing work that is far more sophisticated than the benchmark texts illustrated for opinion and information writing.

Teachers, before embarking on the details of the unit, it is probably important to clarify the term *memoir* and to consider possible goals for the unit. You may be uncertain about the differences between personal narrative writing, autobiography writing, and memoir. In fact, many people use the terms differently, and sometimes interchangeably. The teachers connected with the TCRWP have settled upon our own shared definitions for the terms—these are widely accepted—and we have found it helpful to do so. We think of personal narratives as true stories—they tend to capture a vignette or a small moment in a writer's life. A personal narrative does not attempt to tell a writer's entire life story, as one would expect to find in an autobiography, but instead zooms in on an important moment or event. The writer of a personal narrative *does*, however, try to bring the elements of story to his or her true story, and this writer also asks, "What is this story really about?" bringing that idea forward just as a fiction writer shapes his or her story to advance a meaning or a theme. Memoir, too, often contains stories. These stories are usually told in a retrospective fashion (in a memoir, there is almost always a *now* and a *then*). There is a sense that the text is being written by someone older and wiser, who is now looking back in order to make sense of past experience. But in memoir, the message is especially primary. Memoir is the writer's effort to say something big and important about himself or herself. Stories are there, then, in the service of the larger message. That larger message is an interpretation. Students think of interpretation as the work they do when reading a novel. But one can also "read" or reflect on the stories of one's own life and develop interpretations, or life lessons, about one's own life. The writer rereads or reflects on the story of his or her life and asks, "What are the life lessons I have learned?" "What themes or issues surface in my writing again and again?" These might range from "I'm the kind of person who says what I think, even if this gets me in trouble," to "My father's illness has forced me to be strong," to "The times in life that you most wish you could skip are often the times that change you the most." In this way, reflection leads to an idea, and then writers collect vignettes *around* the idea. Writers of memoir may still construct tight, detailed narratives—a memoirist might write about a day at the zoo with her dad—but the purpose of the story is to use this day, this episode, to reveal something enduring about the writer. Learning to write in this way is an important part of the Common Core State Standards, which require that students learn to use writing as a way to convey reflection.

Teachers who begin the year with a unit on memoir will want to explain to students, then, that the writer who has for years collected stories about his Little League baseball games will now have the opportunity to lay these stories out before him and reflect on their meaning, perhaps eventually learning that what ties these moments together is the sense of belonging that comes from being part of a team or the feeling of pride that comes from watching his father's smile from the stands. This discovery, this process of reflection, is the essence of memoir.

If you choose to start the year with memoir, then you'll probably want to lean on *Memoir: The Art of Writing Well*, which was, as previously mentioned, written as the final book in *Units of Study for Teaching Writing, Grades 3–5*. This write-up will help you imagine how, for experienced writers, that unit can now become the *start* rather than the culmination of the year.

## Materials for the Unit

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Before beginning memoir, you and your colleagues will want to study student work in order to imagine the various shapes your children's writing might take. You'll find examples of student work in *Memoir: The Art of Writing Well*, on the *Resources for Teaching Writing* CD-ROM. The Teachers College Reading and Writing Project website also has a collection of student writing from this unit ([www.readingandwritingproject.com](http://www.readingandwritingproject.com)). If you can do so, you'll benefit from reading Katherine Bomer's book, *Writing a Life*, and Bill Zinsser's *Inventing the Truth*, an anthology of articles on memoir that includes chapters by Toni Morrison, Annie Dillard, and Russell Baker. It will help enormously if you also read some published memoirs. You might consider starting a mentor text basket in your classroom where these texts are displayed. You may want to include stories from *When I Was Your Age* or passages from *Knots on My Yo-Yo String* by Jerry Spinelli. Lee Bennett Hopkins' *Been to Yesterdays: Poems of a Life* is an anthology of poems, as is Cynthia Rylant's *Waiting to Waltz*, and both are memoirs. Picture books such as *We Had a Picnic This Sunday Past* by Jacqueline Woodson, *Chicken Sunday* by Patricia Polacco, or Cynthia Rylant's *When I Was Young in the Mountains* also make for powerful mentor texts. Encourage students to add to this basket as they find other sample memoirs in their independent reading. Encourage students to take time from writing in order to immerse themselves in reading the sort of text they hope to write and to rely on these texts as they draft and revise their own. Keep in mind that familiar texts make for the strongest mentors, so you'll want to make a point of exposing children to these texts through your read-aloud at the start of the year.

As you read over student samples of memoir and published memoir, you will want to continue thinking about what it is that you imagine your students writing. Because students will have grown up working within units of study that channel them into one structure or another—that is, into narrative writing or essay writing or how-to writing—one of the important challenges for students in this unit is asking them to construct their own shape for their writing. The texts that they produce will not all be the same. They'll need to think, "What do I want to say?" and "How can I best structure a piece—organize a text—so as to say what I want?" Your review of published memoirs will show you that there are countless ways that a writer can structure a memoir. The unit will present youngsters with options, which we think is an important message. These are fifth graders, and they should be able to make informed choices and to work with increasing independence. On the other hand, this will be early in the school year, and many of your students will still need lots of guidance. It will be especially

important, then, that you have several optional templates in mind for how youngsters' memoirs might be structured. You can teach them these optional structures and allow them to choose between them or to combine several structures into their own hybrid. One added benefit of this instruction is that by encouraging students to choose a structure that best supports their message, the unit helps students think analytically about structures in texts, become aware that authors choose structures just as they choose words and details, and know that this choice needs to match the authors' message.

## A Few Memoir Structures

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### *Big Idea Writing Followed by a Focused Narrative, Angled to Illustrate That Big Idea*

In this structure, the writer begins with a few reflective lines or a reflective paragraph furthering a realization the writer has come to about life. The writer might begin with words like "All my life . . ." or "I've come to realize . . ." and then progress to set up and unpack one of life's truths. Typically, this idea is then illustrated with a small moment. "Eleven" by Sandra Cisneros is an example, as is Emily's memoir about her older sister from the *Units of Study* resources. The writer sets up the big idea and elaborates on it a bit ("Before my sister went to middle school, when the shine in her eyes was still there, matching her bright smile, she used to play with me. We used to play merry-go-round-chair on my mom's spinning chair, but all that changed when she went to middle school.") and then Emily follows this up with a small moment that illustrates her insight.

### *Essay Structure*

Some writers choose to structure their memoirs like a personal essay: stating an idea, giving reasons or ways that that idea is true, and then supporting these reasons with multiple small moments. For example, a writer might realize that in notebook entry after notebook entry, he writes about times when he hoped his father would come to a school or family event, and at the last minute, his father was too busy. This youngster might decide to write a memoir about his longing for more time with his dad and to structure it as an essay in which each of his support paragraphs tells about one way in which he has missed his dad. If you choose to showcase this structure, you might consider pulling samples from your past personal essay units or from the personal essay samples on the *Resources for Teaching Writing* CD-ROM.

### *The List*

You will find that some memoirs are structured as lists, much like "pearls on a string." The string represents the common theme, and the pearls may be snapshots or small

anecdotes. Paul Auster's *Invention of Solitude* has an excerpt that fits this structure (see Session VI from *Memoir: The Art of Writing Well*), in which he strings together a list of memories with the refrain, "He remembers. . . ." Cynthia Rylant's *When I Was Young in the Mountains*, structured as a series of snapshots, is also a strong mentor text for this structure.

A child writing in this way might choose to string together a list of memories about "first times" or "last times" or a favorite uncle, with a refrain like "He always . . ." or "I remember the first time . . ." to usher in each small anecdote about that topic, elaborating on each story and then returning to the familiar refrain to introduce a new anecdote.

## The Plan for the Unit

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Children will begin this unit by drawing on every strategy they have ever learned in order to collect personal narrative entries. As they do this, remind them to write with focus, beginning their entries with dialogue or small actions and storytelling rather than summarizing. You might bring a chart in from a fourth-grade personal narrative unit and remind writers that they need to draw on all that they already know. After a few days of collecting entries, you'll want to teach students strategies for rereading and reflecting on these entries, trying, as they do, to grow big ideas, which they will then "collect around." This progression of work, then, doesn't exactly follow the pattern of most writing units, with writers collecting focused entries for a few days, then choosing a focused seed idea, then rehearsing and drafting. That previous progression kept writers working with focused texts. This unit opens a Pandora's box of writing about big ideas, allowing for more messiness, using more of a mix of big ideas and small stories, and leaving writers with more work to do to create well-structured pieces out of rich chaos. Writers in this unit do not focus right away on a seed idea but instead choose a *blob idea* (also known as a *writing territory*) and collect entries around that territory. The process of developing big ideas starts early in the unit.

To help writers get in touch with the really big territories and issues of their lives, you may want to read a few especially provocative excerpts from published memoirs to them, knowing that writing can serve, as Kafka writes, as "an ice-axe to break the frozen sea within us." The memoirs you read to them will inspire your young writers to be brave enough to tackle important topics and to be honest. Literature calls us from our hiding places, helping us bring ourselves to the page. The importance of this can't be overemphasized. Of any quality of good writing, the one that matters the most may be that elusive quality writers refer to as *voice*. A person writes with voice when that person allows the imprint of his or her personality to come through in his or her writing. For examples of student writing that you might share with your writers, refer to Session I from the CD-ROM. Once writers have a sense of their blob idea, you can channel them to collect both small moment entries and reflections that relate to that idea. You'll teach writers to do this writing in ways that help them think more about

their emerging insight. One way to do this is to teach writers to ask questions that uncover the mysteries that lie at the heart of these ideas.

Of course, as young people collect entries that relate to their blob idea, they (and you) will be thinking, “How might I somehow pull this together to create a unified piece of writing?” To help your students think about this, you will want to invite them to study mentor texts in order to note various common structures (such as those described earlier). Youngsters can look at a published text and ask, “What component sections does this contain?” and “Why might the author have structured the text in this manner?” and “What can I learn about structuring my memoir from studying how other authors have structured theirs?” After collecting entries, studying student sample and mentor texts, and choosing a structure within which to write, students will be ready to draft. As always, drafting works best if it is fast and furious. The fact that a draft is written quickly generally positions students to willingly engage in some serious revision.

Let’s revisit this progression, looking with more detail at the specific lessons you might teach and the work your students might do.

## **Part One: Developing and Collecting—Writing to Discover Our Thinking, and Writing with Depth**

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As mentioned previously, you’ll begin the unit by telling writers that they’ll be writing memoir. Their goal will be to put themselves onto the page. They will probably still write about small moments, but these will be small moments that show who the writer is as a person, that capture the tensions in the writer’s life, that show turning points and life-themes. You can tell youngsters that you’ll help them make memoir from the small moments of their lives and that the very first thing for them to do is to collect small moments that are not, in fact, small at all. You can remind students of all the strategies they already know for generating Small Moment stories. They can think of a person, a place, a thing, or, perhaps most of all, an issue that matters in their life and then list small moments connected to that person, place, thing, issue. Perhaps a youngster experiences peer pressure and jots small moments when he or she has struggled with peer pressure. Encourage your writers to collect snippets of as many memories as they can squeeze out. You might even take students on a “memory walk” around the school, stopping to reminisce about places where memories live, and ask, “What does this place mean to me?” Even as they are collecting, students can begin to reflect by stopping at significant entries and asking, “What does this make me think or realize about myself?” and “How does this change who I am?” You’ll use your own writing to encourage students to put moments that bristle with meaning onto the page. Encourage students to take just a few minutes to jot possible Small Moment stories into lists, and then channel them to write, fast and furious, long and strong. By fifth grade, your students should know that you expect them to produce a page and a half or two pages in a day’s writing workshop, and similar amounts of

writing at home, and you expect their rehearsal for writing to take minutes, not days. As your students collect these entries, you'll look at them and gauge how much reteaching you need to do. Are they starting with action, dialogue, and storytelling rather than summarizing? Do they seem to be working not only to tell what happened but also to write this as a compelling story? You may want to bring out charts from last year's narrative work to remind writers of all they know. Be ready to say to them, "Writers, you aren't doing anything close to the work I know you can do. Draw a line under what you have written so far, and let's remember what you know, and then start again, this time writing in ways that show all you know." Teach your students that, as Katherine Bomer elaborates in *Writing a Life*, "the resulting lists, dialogues, descriptions, and small narrative moments will constitute the junkyard, treasure chest, photo album, or whatever metaphor you use to describe a collection of thought entries from which students will choose ideas to develop in their memoir draft." After your students have collected Small Moment stories for a few days and reminded themselves how to write those stories, you may teach them that they can annotate these, writing in the margins about the big issues and ideas that hide in the details of those stories. A story about an incident in the school cafeteria may really be a story about fitting in, feeling judged, and wanting to be popular. The writer can jot those topics in the margins of the entry. Children will learn to ask, "What meaning does this pattern have?" and "How do these events, memories, and feelings fit with my idea of who I am?" and "Is there a metaphor, symbol, or image I could use to represent what I'm trying to say about myself and my life?" This will help you transition to the point where you can tell your students that because they are in a unit of study on memoir, they will be writing about the biggest topics of their lives—the really big themes that they find themselves coming back to over and over. Don Murray once said that most people, as writers, have just two or three topics that they write about again and again. What are those topics for your students? Maybe, for one of them, it's the relationship with a sibling, for another it's peer pressure, for a third it's summer camp.

In order for children to discover their writing territories, the themes they return to again and again, help your students mine writing that they've done both in your classroom and perhaps during previous years. Because this unit begins the year, your students' writer's notebooks won't yet brim with writing, but the few entries they have already written will contain enough potential to support this unit. It may also be that your students can bring writer's notebooks from previous years into the classroom. One of the important things to help writers realize is that through the process of collecting and writing around a seed idea (that blob idea), writers' sense of what it is they want to say and to show will change. Instead, writers write toward an emerging sense of what it is we mean to say. We may start by saying why we are writing about something. We may have a general intent, saying something like "I'm going to write a memoir that explores my homesickness for the old house, maybe for the old tree or the tree fort or for both." Then, as we work, we zoom in with increasing decisiveness. Usually ideas about any one topic are complicated, so once a writer has written about one set of ideas on a topic, the writer can come back and revisit the



topic, writing an entry that begins, “On the other hand. . . .” In the end, some of the best writing will result from efforts to get our mental and emotional arms around the full breadth of a topic. Then, too, we teach children the wisdom of Eudora Welty’s advice: “Write what you *don’t know* about what you know.” Where are the mysteries, the questions, the feelings of angst for you in this beloved close-to-home topic? As part of this work, you’ll help writers realize that their ideas about a topic are complicated and that thinking deeply and precisely is important. You can teach writers to choose and develop, reselect and redevelop a seed idea. You will help your students postpone closure, letting their emerging sense of direction and their image of what it is they will write grow within them.

## Part Two: Revising from the Start—Generating Thoughtful Writing

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As writers collect around their big, important blob idea—putting small moments, turning points, and images into their notebooks—you’ll want to refer to *Memoir: The Art of Writing Well*, Session II, to help them rewrite from the start. They’ll need to be reminded that even when writing about big ideas, they still must write with focus and detail. As writer Richard Price once said, “The bigger the topic, the smaller we write.” Because it’s September, you may need to spend some time helping students remember the strategies they already know for writing compelling narratives, for instance, that writers zoom in on a tiny bit of time and dream the dream of that episode, almost enacting it as they write, and that writers aim to capture the drama of the moment in such a way that a reader can feel as if he or she is experiencing the moment for the first time. If this is a moment about saying good-bye to a big brother before he goes off to college, and the writer wants to show that it’s hard to talk about things like missing a sibling, then perhaps the author would begin the story by having himself rehearsing in his mind the conversation he wanted to have with his big brother. Then, approaching the room where his brother was, the writer might reenact the inner monologue of trying to get up the courage to tackle this subject.

You might also show children that the same story can be told in a variety of ways to convey a variety of meanings. You may want to tell about a person you know who often retells stories and that each time this person shapes his or her story, it is to make a different point. In the minilesson, you could show how the person in your life retells a single story differently, based on the point that he or she wants to make. As students gather Small Moment stories to capture and illustrate their big ideas, they can also revise the stories to make them more effective—which will mean steering clear of summary and going toward storytelling or revealing the internal story. You can help writers to draw on all they know about stories—how can the setting of a story, for example, help further what the writer wants to say? Then, too, the writer will also need to write reflection entries. Think about the beginning of “Eleven,” for example. Often when students write ideas, they resort to clichés, in which case you’ll want to teach them the saying, “The words that came first were anyone’s words—I had to make

them my own.” Help writers capture their own specific truth. The conference at the start of *Seeing Possibilities*, a DVD full of video snippets, will help you—and your children—imagine the sort of work writers will be doing.

Expect that children will be concerned about the line between truth and fiction. Frank McCourt, whose memoir *Angela’s Ashes* was published in the United States as nonfiction and in Europe as fiction, often spoke about how important it was that the writer told about true feelings and that it felt true on the page. Writers inevitably won’t remember, exactly, every line of dialogue. Let your kids know that they may have felt that the day was dark and stormy because their emotions were dark and stormy. What’s important is that your writers feel as if the stories they want to tell matter and that they try to write them in such a way that they’ll matter to the reader. They will actually learn to blend the art of fiction writing and personal narrative into just the art of narrative.

All of this will sound like very challenging work—and it is. This does not mean, however, that you should allow your students to eke out tiny entries at a snail’s pace. Instead, expect each writer to write something like two pages a day and an equal amount every evening (ten pages in school a week, double that in all). It is critical that you help writers understand they can grab a pen and write fast, filling a page in ten minutes and moving on to the next. If you question whether this is a realistic expectation for your young writers, ask children to remain in the meeting area after the mini-lesson and to write alongside each other for a bit. Don’t tell them that your goal will be to notice the length of writing they produce in ten minutes of writing time, but *do* rally them to work productively alongside each other. “Let’s not waste a second,” you can say. “Let’s really get a lot of writing done.” After ten minutes of straight writing, ask children to mark where they both began and stopped their writing and to count the number of lines they produced, then triple that number. This new number can give you a rough index for the amount of text that child can do in one day’s writing workshop and again in one evening’s writing time. If the writer produced a particular amount in ten minutes, certainly the child should be able to produce *three times* that amount of writing each day and again each evening. This will help you see that most children in your class can be held to standards for production that are considerably higher than those you have become accustomed to, aligning with the Common Core State Standards. It can also help you see that some children need small-group instruction and lots of praise (a star for half a page, encouragement to keep going, prompts to keep the hand moving, and so on) geared toward helping them write more quickly.

You’ll double the amount of writing your students do by using evenings as well as school time for gathering entries. Note that the homework assignments you give to your children do matter. If you invest in homework, then your children will as well. For support in creating homework assignments, we recommend looking at *Units of Study for Teaching Writing, Grades 3–5*. There are numerous carefully designed homework assignments aligned with this curricular calendar on that CD—ready for you to tailor to your kids, and to print out and send home with children. Children who spend even

just twenty minutes a night writing will have many pages of writing in their notebooks each month—and there is no reason not to ask for such a tiny bit of time!

## Providing Effective Feedback That Will Support Writing Growth

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When you are conferring during the collecting and developing phase of this unit, remember that you need to make sure that you invite every individual to invest in writing and in the class. In *Memoir: The Art of Writing Well*, teachers are reminded, “There are only a few times in the lives of each of us when we feel truly heard. It can be an extraordinarily powerful thing to have someone listen and say, ‘What you’re onto is really huge.’ When someone listens like that, really taking in the significance of what we only gesture toward, suddenly our eyes well with tears, and we find ourselves saying more than we knew we had to say.” This unit will work if it invites every writer to write with honesty, intensity, and energy. It is, therefore, important that we, as teachers, begin the unit with an enormous spirit of receptivity and empathy.

Especially now, at the start of the year and at the start of memoir work, it is critically important that we, as teachers, be people who gasp and wince and weep and cheer in response to the heartbreak and the happiness that students bring into the writing workshop. Ultimately, a youngster will only be able to write well about his or her own life if that writer can reexperience it. We need to listen deeply and to be profoundly moved by our students’ life-themes so that they can be moved by them as well.

If your first job in September is to build the kind of writing workshop where children peek out from their hiding places and take risks with a pencil in hand, then your second will be to assess what that writer produces and ask, “What does this writer most need from me, as a teacher of writing?” John Hattie, Professor of Education at the University of Auckland in New Zealand and researcher of international renown, has analyzed studies involving tens of millions of students in an attempt to quantify what makes for effective instruction and learning. His research lays out three principles that, in over 300,000 studies, have been shown to have the greatest effect on student learning. These three principles state that teachers must set challenging but accessible goals for students, students need to be crystal clear about what these goals are so they can work toward them actively, and students must receive concrete instructional feedback on the extent to which they are approaching these goals and on what they can do next in order to progress.

Keep these three principles in mind when conferring or teaching in small groups. You’ll want to make sure that students are actively working toward goals they care about. You might consider helping each student to start a goal sheet, where he or she records progress. For instance, for students who need to work on stamina and fluency, you might set a goal—writing a page and a half each day in the writing workshop—and then you might devise a system so those writers push their own stamina and record the results. In conferences, you and the writers who are working on stamina

and fluency can talk about strategies that are working, and those that aren't, and they can gauge progress.

## Drafting and Structuring Go Hand in Hand

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By the end of the second week in the unit, you will probably want your minilessons to help writers think about alternate ways to structure their memoirs. As they move to drafting, writers need to ask, "Will the piece contain one focused narrative? Two stories held together by reflection? Will there be a clearly stated idea, or will the story suggest a theme?" You will use student work and published texts to show students some of the most common structures and will help them to spend some time charting possible shapes for the writing that they'll do. As students consider one way to structure their writing, it will probably be important for them to examine published work in order to notice the particulars of what writers have done. *Memoir: The Art of Writing Well* will be a great help to you at this point. "Eleven," by Sandra Cisneros from *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*, could be in that folder—and don't worry if children have studied it before. We also recommend "Not Enough Emilys," from *Hey World, Here I Am!* by Jean Little and "My Grandmother's Hair" by Cynthia Rylant from the anthology *Home*.

Draw on samples of student writing from the Reading and Writing Project website and from the CD that accompanies *Units of Study for Teaching Writing, Grades 3–5* as an added source of support as students explore alternate structures. You may want to invite children to examine their own entries for structure, boxing out sections that resemble the narratives they will have written all year and sections that resemble essays, all the while searching for the structure that will best frame the big meaning they hope to express. When reading a text, looking at its structure, you can teach students to look for component parts. Paragraphs can help them do this. Some kinds of words also signal the microstructures in a text. Some signal words suggest the text is organized chronologically (the word *next*, for instance), and some suggest the text is organized to highlight contrasting information (words like *yet*). Still other signal words suggest the text reveals a cause-and-effect relationship (*therefore*). You want to teach students to read the whole excerpt to notice when the author has shifted from writing in one microstructure into writing in a second microstructure. Is the text composed of a list of items? Does the text contain one small story after another? Is it a single extended narrative? Is it composed of questions and then answers? Is it a claim followed by one reason after another?

Although writers can make calculated decisions to organize a text in one way or another, the actual process of writing is more passion-hot than critic-cold. Milton Meltzer has said, "In the writer who cares, there is a pressure of feelings which emerges in the rhythm of sentences, in the choice of details, in the color of the language." Sometimes the writer inserts reflection at the very beginning (who can ever forget "Eleven" and that image of an onion?). Sometimes the writer inserts it at the

end (think of Jerry Spinelli's *Knots in My Yo-Yo String* and how he comments on his own story at the end, telling the reader what it makes him think and feel). This will be new work for your students, to actively plan for how their story will lead the reader toward and around ideas and how they'll state those ideas. They don't have to know all this at the beginning, though—you'll get them started writing a few small moments in their notebooks, then they'll reflect on some of the ideas in those moments and on the issues, themes, and ideas that often interest them as writers, and they'll focus on stories that show those ideas. Then you're off!

Sometimes young (and adult) writers find it helpful to take a few minutes to make a storyboard before starting to draft the memoir—showing in each box what anecdote they'll tell and where the bits of reflective writing will be. Others like a flowchart. And often, it's in the drafting that writers realize they need to pause and think about their structure. Sometimes, as writers write their memoir, they begin to clarify in their mind why an anecdote is so important and what idea it is really showing. Then they can go back and insert reflection at the beginning of the piece. Or they can try waiting until the end and putting reflection there. Have some familiar memoirs that you have marked up to show where the writer is telling a story and where the writer is developing an idea or reflection. It's also helpful for your writers to talk to a partner, explaining what they want to do in their draft—how they want to develop their memoir, what structure and craft they'll use.

### **Part Three: Revise to Bring Out Meaning and Balance the Internal and External Stories**

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Students will have revised their entries throughout this unit, and now they will revise their drafts. You may want to refer to Session IX through Session XIII in *Memoir: The Art of Writing Well* to guide your instruction while also relying on what you notice when studying your children's writing. One of the first things you'll probably want to teach children is how to revisit the most significant parts of their drafts to elaborate on those parts. You might teach children how including telling details can help convey their thoughts. You'll certainly want to show how you emphasize the parts of the story that illuminate the central idea or theme. One significant craft move, which writers use to illuminate such themes, is the use of refrains. You can teach your children to reread their writing for powerful lines that are worth highlighting and to figure out where and how those lines could be repeated in the piece to make the most essential ideas stand out. As children write to reveal the central theme of their piece, you'll also want to teach them to revise by telling the truth. Return children to the idea of memoir as a place to which we bring our "heartbreak and happiness" and teach them to bring out the emotional truth of a moment by revealing what they were feeling at the time or the truth about how they feel now as they look back on a moment. Then, too, you will want to teach children that they might revise by leaving things out. Annie Dillard says the true work of memoir writing is learning how to "fashion a text,"

knowing “what to put in and what to leave out.” We all know the child who writes without leaving a single detail to the imagination, beginning with blueberry pancakes at breakfast and ending with the chicken and mashed potato dinner he enjoyed in the evening. For this child, and for many children really, it can be difficult to know which details to include and which to leave out, which details further the overall theme of the story and which are merely inconsequential distractions. Memoir offers you an opportunity to teach this learned art, showing young writers how to ask, “What is it I’m really trying to say here?” and then “Which details help to show that?”

Using a metaphor or comparison also adds beauty and craft to memoirs and can provide a means to capturing an idea or feeling that is too big or complicated for words. Your job will be to teach the children that writing with metaphor is not about tacking on a comparison but rather about allowing a strong metaphorical image to emerge from the writing that already exists. Another way to revise and elaborate is to incorporate more than one small moment or to try the same small moment, this time angling it to show more than one idea. Sometimes you can show writers how to develop more than one emotion, or feeling—many good stories center on moments of complicated emotions.

You can also teach your writers how to experiment with different crafts in order to illuminate the underlying theme, as the Common Core State Standards suggest. If my theme is the trouble I have explaining myself to my mother, for instance, I could show this through dialogue. But I could also try it again, this time contrasting what happens in the dialogue with inner thinking. You may teach your students to consider if a different small moment could illustrate this theme. They could go back to the notebook to try it out or draft a new part and see how it fits with their overall draft.

You might also want to touch upon strategies for endings by studying mentor texts, noticing how writers reflect upon their experiences and provide closure. Writers can try several endings. Some of Jerry Spinelli’s memoirs in *Knots in My Yo-Yo String*, for instance, end with reflection from a current perspective. Others hint at what happens next for the character—what story will be next. Others end with a sort of cliff-hanger, leaving it unclear whether the writer had learned his lesson or if it will be repeated.

## Part Four: Publishing and Celebrating

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Katherine Bomer has been calling for more emphasis on celebration as a significant part of the writing process. She offers up the idea of children writing their memoirs in large print, so they wallpaper corridors and ceilings as installation pieces. You may want to invite students to rehearse reading their pieces aloud and then tape them for a kind of *This American Life* podcast. They could sort them by theme and publish them in a few anthologies. They could sort them by topic and publish them in different places in the school, so there are writing boards for pieces about families, others for memoirs that include pets and animals, others about our bodies, and so on. Invite your students into the celebration decisions, and you may particularly encourage



them to sort stories by theme—if your students know ahead of time that their stories are sorted this way, it often helps them to develop that theme!

## Additional Resources

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As mentioned in the write-up, the memoir unit of study is an ambitious one for your students. The good news, however, is that you can teach a memoir unit in several different ways, knowing that some of your students will essentially produce personal narrative writing while others will grasp the full breadth of reflective writing, and either way the work will be good for them. You will want to look at the student work on the *Units of Study for Teaching Writing, Grades 3–5* CD and on the Reading and Writing Project website ([www.readingandwritingproject.com](http://www.readingandwritingproject.com)) for examples of student memoir. If some of your students struggle and end up writing pieces that feel closer to personal narrative than memoir, lean on the fourth-grade personal narrative write-up to help them with this work.

In any case, expect your students to begin the unit writing focused, detailed, chronologically ordered personal narrative small moments. They should have no trouble generating topics, though if a few do struggle with this, we recommend you convene a small group and support them in this venture, making sure to teach transferable strategies, assess understanding, and then expect independence quickly. Now, at the beginning of fifth grade, it is reasonable to expect children to write a page and a half in one day's writing workshop. They should all write with end punctuation and paragraphs and with a variety of sentence structures. For those who don't, you'll want to convene small groups from the get-go and teach into this work. If you look at their on-demand writing and assess what students can produce in a sitting, you'll use this as a baseline and plan instruction that will help their writing progress steadily from there.

The following resource, which offers one possible path for instruction, is based on the book *Memoir: The Art of Writing Well*, from the *Units of Study for Teaching Writing, Grades 3–5*. Specific references are made to the fifteen sessions in this book, as well as suggestions for additional teaching points you might incorporate. As with all our units, we encourage you to build on and adapt this work to meet the specific needs of your children.

## One Possible Sequence of Teaching Points

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### **Part One: Developing and Collecting—Writing to Discover Our Thinking, and Writing with Depth**

- “Today I want to teach you that writers often begin by writing lots and lots of Small Moment stories—small moments that capture the tensions in the writer's life, that show turning points and life-themes. Today we are going to collect snippets of as many memories as you can squeeze out, and write!”

- *Mid-workshop teaching point:* “When writers are stuck for ideas, we rely on what we already know. One way to do this is by listing the strategies we’ve learned for collecting small moments (first times, last times, important people, places, things), quickly in our notebooks, and using one of them to quickly develop new topics to write about.”
- “Today I want to remind you to draw on everything you already know about good writing to better your entries. Writers need to ask ourselves if we are using action, incorporating dialogue, using descriptive details, and storytelling rather than summarizing.”
- “Today I’m going to teach you that memoirists look for Life Topics by rereading their writer’s notebooks or recent entries, looking for subjects that thread their way through much of what they have written. *Uncovering Life Topics* (Session I, *Memoir: The Art of Writing Well*).”
- *Tip:* “Writers reread old entries, asking themselves, ‘What is it I’m seeing again and again in my writing?’ They’re on the lookout for people, places, emotions, or objects that repeat themselves.”
- *Mid-workshop teaching point:* “Sometimes Life Topics are hidden, and writers need to dig deeper to discover them. As writers, we can look at seemingly unconnected entries and ask, ‘How might these connect with each other?’ Often, there are underlying issues or truths beneath the seemingly separate bits.”
- *Tip:* “Sometimes a writer finds he or she has one or two great images—within which the writer’s heart opens. We search for those images.”
- *Share:* “Writers take charge of their own writing lives by creating self-assignments.”
- “Today I want to teach you that writers remember the wise words of poet Richard Price, ‘The bigger the meaning, the smaller you write.’ They take the big meanings they uncover and imagine the ways they might write small about them, often by collecting Small Moment stories that go with a Life Topic, attempting to bring out the deeper meaning as they write the story. As they do this, they rely on everything they know about generating small moment ideas. They might think of first times, last times, turning points, or moments when we learned something, but this time using those strategies to generate ideas that relate to a Life Topic.”
- *Mid-workshop teaching point:* “Writers use what they know, the strategies they have in their back pocket, to generate and write small moments. They do the same when writing about big meanings. Yesterday you learned to reread your entries looking for hidden themes that underlie several stories. Another way to write about big ideas is by taking that idea and writing, ‘The thought I have about this is . . .’ and then writing long to uncover new thoughts.”

- “Writers don’t just write to come up with new story ideas; they write to find depth in the ideas they’ve already uncovered. One way to do this is by writing, as a famous memoirist once said, ‘Write what you *don’t know* about what you know.’ To do this, writers take a topic they know well and ask, ‘What *don’t* I know about what I know?’ and ‘Where’s the mystery in this topic?’ and then write to explore those questions.”
  - ▮ *Mid-workshop teaching point:* “Writers write to explore new ideas and do so by asking and entertaining hard questions and by visiting a subject, repeatedly, from different perspectives. After a writer has written about a subject by advancing one idea or claim on that subject, the writer may deliberately try to write about the same subject, advancing the exact opposite idea.”
  - ▮ *Share:* “Sometimes a writer thinks about a topic or a question by linking that one starting subject to one thing, another, another” (to a quote, a statistic, a memory, a classmate’s idea).
  
- “Today I want to teach you that when a writer wants to take a deep dive in his or her writing, one strategy that we use is to read (or listen) to literature and then write. We let the story wash over us, and then in the silence afterwards, we write what we need to write. We don’t write about the text; we write in the direction the text has pushed us.”
  - ▮ *Mid-workshop teaching point:* “Writers make use of multiple strategies as they write, combining and layering what they’ve learned. Even as they freewrite off a piece of literature, a writer might choose to then take that writing and ask, ‘What’s the mystery here?’ or decide to write small about a time in their life when this big idea was especially true. All of this is just to say that writers make use of everything they know, employing strategies on more than one day and for more than one purpose.”
  - ▮ *Share:* “Writers can rely on partners to help them make plans for future work.”
  
- “Today I’m going to teach you that writers need lots of ways to accomplish almost any job. Writers have lots of strategies for choosing a seed idea, and we know that sometimes the process of focusing our writing, choosing a seed idea, happens over the course of many days. Strategies for choosing a seed idea include: rereading entries with intention and value, marking small parts of writing that stand out, looking for connections and patterns, categorizing our most powerful writing into several possible Life Topics, choosing one Life Topic, and writing an entry that combines various images and ideas related to our topic.”
  - ▮ *Mid-workshop teaching point:* “After choosing a blob idea, writers take time to capture this idea in a paragraph or two.”
  - ▮ *Share:* “Writers know that probing questions help writing to evolve more quickly. They take a reflective stance on their own ideas by asking questions like, ‘What are the reasons I keep writing about this?’ or ‘I’ve written what’s

obvious about this, so what else can I write?’ or ‘What do I want to show about myself?’ and ‘What does this say about me?’”

## Part Two: Drafting and Structuring Go Hand in Hand

- “Writers structure texts in lots of different ways, and today I’m going to teach you a strategy for doing this. One way we learn to structure our texts is by reading texts other authors have written and by studying the structures they have used or made. We can then decide which structure feels best suited to our topic and make a writing plan for ourselves.”
  - ▮ *Mid-workshop teaching point:* “Writers often need to make decisions as they study mentor texts, deciding whether they are memoirs or personal narratives, and then making a decision about what structure the text seems to follow.”
  - ▮ *Share:* “Writers take time to reread their own writing from an aerial view, noticing how they’ve structured their entries.”
- “Today I am going to teach you how to be your own teacher! When a writer can’t go to a writing teacher, we can become our own. But before we can suggest next steps for ourselves, we need to spend time listening. A good writing teacher looks backwards in order to look forward. He or she might ask questions about previous work and how it turned out, why a writer is trying certain things, what else he or she plans to try, and what plans the writer has for what he or she will do next.”
  - ▮ *Mid-workshop teaching point:* “As writers elaborate on their seed idea and collect small moments to go along with it, they often find they want to revise what they are saying. Rewriting and revising a seed idea, imagining new possibilities, is an important part of the writing process.”
  - ▮ *Share:* “Writers share among themselves and help each other to care about their blob ideas by discussing the ways they’re finding to invest themselves in their topic.”
- “Today I want to teach you that before writers begin their first drafts outside of their notebooks, they think hard about how they can inspire themselves to do their best work. Writing well requires talent and knowledge and skill, yes—but also magic. One way to find our own inspiration is by learning from other authors about what *they* do and then making our own plan from what we learned.”
  - ▮ *Mid-workshop teaching point:* “Writers find the courage to write about the real topics that are on their minds. When we find ourselves writing entries where everything is perfect, we can ask, ‘Where’s the struggle in this subject?’ and ‘Is this the truth of what has been on my mind lately?’”



text, relying on what she or he learned from studying mentor texts to help make this decision.”

- *Mid-workshop teaching point:* “When writers are looking to lift the level of their own writing, they study what other writers have done. They think, ‘What do I like that this writer has done?’ and ‘How could I use a similar technique in my writing?’”
- *Share:* “Writers often alternate between narrative and reflective writing when working on a piece. They write a bit of their narrative and then stop to write reflectively about it, exploring new ideas and finding big meanings they’ve yet to bring forth in their narrative. Writers then return to their narrative to revise and rework it, bringing out what they discovered while reflecting.”

### **Part Three: Revise to Bring Out Meaning and to Balance the Internal and External Story**

- “Writers know that the hard work they do changes as they work through the writing process. Today I want to teach you about a special sort of reading writers do when they read their own writing. They do not skim over it as if they’ve seen the draft a hundred times. Instead, they examine the draft in all its particulars, allowing the page to teach them how to write.”
  - *Mid-workshop teaching point:* “Writing well takes attentiveness, and this is something writers know well. It takes getting to hard parts and pushing past them, instead of using the hard parts as an invitation to wander around hoping someone is going to deliver a magic solution.”
  - *Share:* “Writers read our own drafts noting the component sections, asking, ‘How is this draft almost-but-not-quite structured?’ Then we make revisions to bring forth and complete the structures.”
- “Today I want to teach you how writers often take a tiny detail from our lives—often something that could be very ordinary—and let that one detail represent the whole big message of our story or our memoir.”
  - *Mid-workshop teaching point:* “As writers, you’ve focused intently on crafting powerful lines as you write—lines that hold meaning that is enormous to your writing. Writers often search their writing for lines such as these looking for ways to highlight them, because highlighting a particularly strong line can also highlight a particularly strong idea. One way to make a powerful line stand out is by repeating it here and there across a piece of writing.”
  - *Share:* “When writers use a metaphor at the end of our piece, we first ask, ‘What message do I want to convey as this story ends?’ and then use the metaphor to bring forth that meaning.”



## Part Four: Editing, Publishing, and Celebrating

- “Today I want to teach you that when writers edit our writing, we read it out loud to hear the sound of each word, to hear the rhythm of our sentences. Truman Capote wrote, ‘To me, the greatest pleasure of writing is the inner music the words make.’ The sound of our words is powerful. Writers communicate with readers by choosing words that convey not only the content but also the mood, the tone, and the feelings that we want to convey.”
- ◆ *Mid-workshop teaching point:* “Writers can play with punctuation as we write to bring out the tone in our writing, making our writing sound as we intended it to.”
- ◆ *Share:* “Writers rely on partners to help them edit, putting one piece between the two of them and reading it, inch by inch, asking whether each sentence creates a clear image and moves the idea along.”



## UNIT TWO

# The Interpretive Essay

*Exploring and Defending Big Ideas about Life and Texts*

## OCTOBER

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) have helped to ignite new interest in a kind of writing that goes by various names: opinion, review, essay, editorial, persuasive. Fifth graders who have grown up in TCRWP writing workshops will have progressed through a spiral curriculum in opinion/argument writing, and when this unit begins, these writers will be poised to work toward (and sometimes beyond) the Common Core State Standards requirements for this grade level. Your students should enter fifth grade with a felt sense for the ways narrative and expository (essay/opinion/persuasive) writing are different from each other. Across this year, students will engage in a sequence of opinion/argument work, some of it related to content-area studies. We are suggesting that in this, the first essay unit of your fifth graders' year, students write what we are referring to as interpretive essays and arguments. These opinion texts will advance big ideas that are grounded in students' lives and also in the lives of the characters they're coming to know through their fiction reading. The unit is strategically placed to build from the work students have been doing in memoir writing, to support the interpretation and synthesis skills crucial to higher-level comprehension, and to give students significant opportunities to develop and practice the skills needed to write extended essays. This curricular calendar unit draws in part on the book *Breathing Life into Essays* by Calkins and Gillette from the *Units of Study for Teaching and Writing, Grades 3–5*, and it draws on very successful work that New York City teachers did in March 2011 to prepare students for essays on the standardized tests.

The unit also draws on Character and Interpretation units of study in reading. It is fun to consolidate some work and extend other work, and that is what we are

suggesting in this year's version of the essay unit. The revisions have been made with an eye toward helping situate students so that in the spring of the year they'll be ready to learn to write on-demand, structured, thesis-driven, flash-draft essays on standardized tests.

The Common Core State Standards have also shined a spotlight on evidence gathering and crafting in expository writing: in particular, the fifth grade standards for opinion writing expect students to be able to provide logically ordered reasons that are supported by facts and details. While this appears as a mere line item, in order for this standard to truly sink in and for students to be able to demonstrate this work successfully, deep and sustained teaching and learning have to take place. This unit, with a focus on finding multiple sources of evidence to back up interpretive statements, gives you a chance to lift the level of the work your students do in the heart of their essays, in the body paragraphs where they will use evidence from not only their own lives but also literature to support their big ideas. This also gives you an opportunity early in the year to teach students to elaborate more formally on ideas they're developing in reading. The invitation to use literature as a way into big ideas will support deepened reciprocity between reading and writing, something that is clearly valued in the CCSS.

We anticipate that some of you might question this path. There is no magic yellow brick road, of course, so this is just one possible unit. But we have thought very carefully about this, weighing our own reservations against the potential benefits, and want to share this thinking with you. One of your reservations, for example, might be that you wonder whether the work students will be doing in this unit is similar to what they did during the memoir unit. This is a reservation we had as well, but we finally decided to embrace the overlap. Growth in writing takes time. And we saw that during the 2010 school year, many fifth-grade students who aspired to write memoir at the start of fifth grade ended up instead writing pieces that looked very much like personal narratives, only they tended to have passages at the start and the end that contextualized the narratives into the whole of the writers' lives. This unit exists, then, partly because we expect that when asked to write memoir, many students will have only gestured toward being interpretive. There will be room aplenty for continued growth! If you question whether this unit is too advanced for your students, know we have also worried about that—and read the upcoming discussion.

## **On-Demand Assessment to Determine Which Essay Unit Is Best for Your Classroom This Year**

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Teachers, before you embark on this unit, you will want to assess your students and reflect on whether you'd be better off teaching the unit on opinion/essay writing that we have detailed in the fourth-grade curricular calendar. To assess, we recommend you conduct the on-demand opinion writing assessment that is patterned after the narrative writing assessments that the TCRWP community has done for years. If you elect to do this, say to your students, "Think of an idea or topic that you have strong

feelings about. Write your opinion and give reasons that tell why you feel this way. Use everything you know about essay writing, letter writing, speeches, and reviews.” We do not think this on-demand needs to be shaped by the agenda for this unit—let it simply be an assessment of your students’ abilities to write opinion quickly. Give them just one hour to do this work. When you tell your students about the task, don’t review the characteristics of opinion writing or otherwise scaffold them to be successful. This is just a pretest. Whether you decide to go forward with this unit or to teach the essay unit detailed in the fourth-grade calendar, you will hope that between this assessment and the end of Unit One, your students will make giant strides. The fact that they may not start by doing stellar work should not be a problem.

After your students do this quick on-demand opinion essay, study what they have done. The TCRWP’s Common Core State Standards–aligned *Opinion Writing Continuum* can help you see where your students are in relationship to grade-level expectations on the Common Core State Standards. Now, at the start of fifth grade, your students’ writing should be a solid Level 7 on the Opinion Continuum. By the end of the year, your writers should produce work that is equivalent to the Level 8 texts in the TCRWP *Opinion Writing Continuum* (there are also exemplar texts in the appendix of the Common Core State Standards, and you’ll want to calibrate against them as well, although they are not on-demand texts produced without adult input). Of course, you can use the Common Core State Standards and the TCRWP continuum to look not only at goals that some external evaluator might set but also at the next steps your students need to take. If their essays match the Common Core State Standards descriptors and exemplars for second graders, for example, then you’ll need to aim for them to write like the Level 6 exemplar—only you won’t want to settle with that level of achievement! If most of your students seem to have grasped the structure of essays, writing a thesis statement or a claim near the start of the essay and then writing a few paragraphs of supportive information, categorized according to the different ways in which they are supporting the claim, and if their writing is fairly long and developed—that is, if almost all of them write more than a page and many of them write closer to a page and a half in their on-demand writing—then you’ll probably elect to follow this more advanced fifth-grade write-up. But if your students aren’t at this place just yet, follow the fourth-grade unit, and use this write-up as enrichment for your more proficient essayists.

## The Plan of the Unit

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During this unit, you will help students write and revise two essays: one that is interpretive of the students’ own lives but may draw also on the experiences of characters in the literature they’re reading, then a second essay focused on an interpretation of a character or characters.

As mentioned earlier, if the essays most of your students write during the on-demand setting are not structured like claim/support essays, you’ll probably decide to

channel the class to work on the fourth-grade version of an essay unit. But if there is a cluster of students in your class whose essays do not contain a thesis statement and several supportive paragraphs, you may work in a small group to coach these students in how to rewrite their essays so they do adhere to this structure. Students can quickly revise their on-demand writing, therefore starting this unit with a more solid foundation in the structure of an essay. Your hope is for this structure-of-the-essay work to become a backdrop for your unit, so that your teaching and your students' work can be angled especially toward the goal of thinking and writing interpretively.

We suggest that in order to help your students grow ideas as they write—and this time, the ideas will be about themselves—you can teach students that just as readers read, thinking about the characters in books and thinking, “This is the kind of person who . . .,” so, too, writers can reread our own lives and grow theories about ourselves. Just as students will, in the reading workshop, grow ideas such as “Rob is the kind of person who holds his feelings in, he doesn’t let other people or even himself know about his sadness,” they can now, in the writing workshop, grow ideas about themselves. These ideas might be captured in claims that begin with sentence-starters such as “I’m the kind of person who . . .,” or “Some people think that I’m . . . , but really I’m . . .,” or “On the outside, I seem like someone who . . . , but on the inside I’m . . .” During the reading workshop, your students will be learning that once they generate ideas or claims about a character, they then read differently, looking for evidence that supports or challenge their initial theories and letting those theories evolve. Now, with your help, your young writers can learn that, in a similar way, they can live for a day or two with a theory about themselves in hand, noticing events and interactions that support or challenge the theories. Just as readers’ theories evolve and become more nuanced and complex as they take in more parts of a character, so, too, writers’ theories about themselves and “their people” can evolve and become more complex, more nuanced, and more precise. All of this will be described in great detail in the next section of this write-up.

For now, it is enough to say that students can easily work for ten days to produce a single interpretive essay in which they develop an idea about themselves or another person they know well (perhaps a parent or a sibling). As they do this work, students will practice growing ideas, making a claim, collecting and organizing supportive evidence for that claim, and laying out that evidence in a logical fashion for readers. They will learn to write in a logical structure conveyed partly through transitional phrases that build relationships between chunks of the text and the main claim, and they will learn also to embed quotations, anecdotes, or observations within paragraphs. With coaching and mentor texts, writers will learn not only to stitch a tapestry of supporting specifics together but also to elaborate in ways that illuminate the relationship between the information and the writers’ claim. This synthesis and analysis are at least Level 3 and potentially Level 4 work according to Webb’s Depth of Knowledge criteria.

After students work for two weeks drafting and revising this first essay, we suggest they write a second essay, using the skills they will have developed this time to write not about themselves but about a character they have come to know from their reading.

Instead of writing what is essentially a personal essay, supported primarily with details from the writer's own life, this second essay will revolve around theories about texts, and now students will substantiate their theories with evidence drawn not from their lives but from passages in novels. Still, in many ways, the essay about a character will be similar to the essays that students will have written about themselves, giving students a second chance at writing an interpretive essay, presenting and defending ideas about a person. Of course, it is through revision that writers stand on the shoulders of what they could once do, reaching toward dramatically higher goals, and so you will certainly want students to mark up the first drafts of both their essays with Post-it notes in which they self-critique their writing. You can help them jot goals and plans for their next draft, making sure their aspirations are high enough that draft two represents significant progress. After students have revised their second character-based essay, they can choose the stronger of the two essays to bring through final revisions and edits, including peer and self-review using a rubric, to publishing.

If your students are especially proficient writers, you might extend this unit to include a more thematically focused essay that can come from the students asking themselves, as they read and talk about books, "How can I live my life differently because I have read this book?" and "What is this book teaching me that pertains not just to this book but to all my life?" and even "How does this idea present itself in similar and different ways across texts?" Students will already be reflecting on these questions during the reading workshop, and now, during the writing workshop, you can help them know that they can look back through the pages of their lives, asking the same things. "What is this life teaching me that pertains not just to today but to my tomorrows?" "How have I changed?" "What have I learned that I can carry with me?" "What experiences have I had that have made me live my life differently?" This sort of thinking, then, can set the stage for students to write interpretive essays in which they develop a claim that puts forth a lesson that applies across people and texts. Writers can then draw on stories they've read as well as upon their own experiences to back up these claims. For some examples of essays that take on this work, although not necessarily in the same structure that we're about to describe, visit the Library of Congress Letters about Literature site at [www.lettersaboutliterature.org](http://www.lettersaboutliterature.org).

Now let's take a closer look at the likely progression of these cycles.

## **Launching the Unit: On-Demand Writing Possibly Followed Up with Coaching and a Second On-Demand**

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If your students' on-demand essays do not state a claim, provide some reasons that the claim is true, and support these reasons with evidence more or less grouped together in paragraphs, you'll probably decide to teach a simpler version of this unit, which is currently the recommended fourth-grade essay unit (see November). But you may decide to go forward with this unit despite your students' somewhat shaky foundational skills, in which case we recommend you start by devoting a day to helping



your students remember the three or four most important things about this kind of writing, as listed above, and by giving them the chance to spend one quick day working furiously to revise their on-demand essays (including scissoring them into paragraphs, taping them onto new pages of notebook paper, and adding transitions, or rewriting them altogether). If it is at all possible, you'll want to keep your students' on-demand original, giving them duplicate copies of their on-demand essays to revise so that you preserve the baseline data against which you can study and show growth across the month and, eventually, across the year of opinion writing. If you elect to follow this route, we recommend you give students lots of coaching but just a day to revise their first writing, working against the clock. You can tell them ahead of time that they'll have a chance to show what they learn from this work by being given a second on-demand opinion-writing assessment on the third day of the unit, this time reminding them before they start that they'll want to state a claim, to indent, to use transitions and topic sentences, and to write an introduction and conclusion. Reminding students to do these things will not mean that they actually do them. When you study each writer's second on-demand draft, you'll be given a window onto whether a student can, in fact, do this work and might have, at the time of the first essay assessment, simply forgotten (or not heard) the characteristics you expect in essay writing. Of course, you may also learn that even when prompted, some of your students find the fundamentals of essay writing to be challenging. If so, don't be surprised. The good news is that you'll have lots of opportunities to explicitly teach this genre.

This means that either your students will show, in their first on-demand writing, that they grasp the structure of essays or by the end of day three you will have completed an intense round of teaching in ways that mean that every student's work already shows dramatic improvement, which of course would be a powerful way to start a unit. If you elect to do the two rounds of on-demand writing with instruction in between, you can help students notice the amount of improvement in their essays just from the first three days of the unit. You can use this as a way to teach students that throughout the unit, they should expect their work to grow in leaps and bounds. If students make dramatic progress between day one and three, you can teach them to expect this kind of progress from themselves and remind them that they'll have another chance to write an on-demand opinion piece at the end of the month. Imagine how amazing their essays will be by then!

## **Part One: Starting Work toward an Interpretive Essay That Students Will Draft and Revise across Almost Two Weeks—Essayists Grow Compelling Ideas in Writer's Notebooks**

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### *Generating Ideas about Themselves or Someone Close to Them*

In order to launch the portion of this unit in which you teach your students to write interpretive essays about themselves, it is important to recall the work that they will

be doing simultaneously in the reading workshop. By the time you want to teach interpretive essays, fifth graders will have learned that readers watch how the people in a story act and will grow tentative theories about those characters. We “read” characters. The readers in your classroom will have spent some time not only this year but during many previous years thinking about characters’ actions as windows to the personality of each character, and they will have tried to find words to capture the sort of person that a character is. A reader, early on in *The Tiger Rising*, might claim that Sistine is “snotty” or “rude.” With encouragement, the reader may reach for more precise words than “snotty,” perhaps saying, “Sistine is tough as nails” or she is “prickly.” During the reading workshop, students will have noticed not only what characters do but also how they do those things, and your students will have come to realize that all this is revealing. Sistine keeps to herself, yes—but how does she do that? What is it about the way she does this that gives hints as to what is going on inside her? Readers will have been taught to think of the actions that a character takes as decisions and to consider how the character could have acted differently, and to think, “Most people would have, in that situation . . . , but what I notice that this character did is. . . . This shows that. . . .” Then, too, perhaps readers will, by now, have been prompted to think about the objects that a character carries as sometimes being mirrors to the character’s personality.

Teachers, you may be wondering what any of this has to do with the *writing* workshop. Here is our idea. If we want to teach students what it truly means to grow ideas about characters, then why not help students understand that in fact, in life, just as readers grow ideas about character, we human beings grow ideas about ourselves and the people we care about. Just as a reader can regard Sistine’s actions in *The Tiger Rising* as windows to her personality, so, too, that reader can regard her own actions, and her father’s actions, her brother’s actions, as equally telling. Just as that reader could take an incident in a story—say, when Rob (in *The Tiger Rising*) suffered silently through tormenting taunts from bullies on the school bus—and grow ideas about why the person (Rob) acts that way (thinking also about how this action fits with other actions), so, too, a reader can think about what particular incidents in her own life (or in the lives of people she knows) reveal. Just as a reader can ask, “Why might Rob just sit there on the bus and let those bullies grind their fists into his scalp?” and look for answers in other parts of the story, so, too, this person could ask, “Why do I fly into a rage so quickly at any little thing my little brother does?” and look for answers in other parts of her life. Of course, these questions do not have easy answers. They require a person to go out on the thin ice of speculation. But just as during the reading workshop a student writes, talks, and thinks to explore tentative answers for questions for which there are no clear answers, so, too, that student can do the same work during writing time. “Could it be that I do this because. . . . Or could it. . . . I think maybe. . . . But then again, perhaps. . . .” So—imagine this. You say to writers, “In our writing workshop, we are going to be growing ideas—theories—about ourselves or perhaps about a person we care a lot about like a grandparent, a sister. We’re going to try to develop really big, insightful, wise ideas about ourselves (or that person in our life) and write essays to develop those ideas. I’ll be showing you how to do this—and here is the really cool thing. All the

lessons you have learned about growing ideas about characters in books can help you grow ideas about yourself as well.” Teachers, notice that the emphasis for now is on writing to grow ideas. At least at the start of this work, you are probably not expecting students to write essay-like entries. Instead, for a few days—two or three—you’ll expect them to use their writer’s notebooks to grow ideas about themselves or a person in their lives.

When reading a novel and growing ideas about the characters, the reader starts with the particular small moments, the incidents. So when helping students grow ideas about themselves or about someone they know, you may want to teach them that one way to grow such ideas is to start by simply recording an incident, a moment, that matters. One teacher illustrated this by telling her students a small moment story of taking her son to college and getting into a quarrel with him over how to set up his dorm room. That teacher then showed her students that after writing this vignette, she reread it, asking questions such as “What does this show about me?” “Why was I acting this way?” “What was really, really, really going on for me?” If you do your own version of this, you will probably want to show yourself struggling a bit—as the students will struggle—to come up with ideas. You might reread whatever incident you’ve recorded and mutter, “I don’t see an idea here—it is just about (whatever).” Then show students that instead of just flicking the page of your notebook aside, hoping to look elsewhere for an idea, you instead do some work to generate ideas. The work is really writing-to-learn or freewriting. To teach students how to do this, after looking somewhat blankly at an entry you have written, pick up your pen and shrug as if you are totally unsure if this is going to yield something because as you start writing, you have nothing in mind to say. Then reread the entry, muttering it to yourself, and when you come to the end, write, “The thought I have about this is . . .” and then keep writing, unsure what the thought is that you have about the entry. Show students that thoughts surface as you keep your pen moving. You may be writing “off from” the entry, writing a paragraph at the end of the entry, or you may be jotting notes in the margins of your entry, annotating it. Either way, this is fast note-taking writing where the goal is not good writing; instead the goal is simply to find the terrain and the insights that can become an umbrella idea/topic for your upcoming work on a personal essay. (For more on this kind of lesson, including a chart with possible questions to ask when rereading narrative entries, see the *Units of Study* book *Breathing Life into Essays*, Session V: “Generating Essay Writing” from *Narrative Writing*.) The teacher who’d written about taking her son to college used this sort of freewriting to explore questions about that incident. In the midst of this writing, she put this onto the page: “I want things to go well for my sons, so I try to control them.” That teacher eventually showed students that she later reread all she’d written and found this one claim to be deeply true. She boxed it out and then wrote more about it, asking more specific questions such as “Are there other incidents from my life that go with this?” and “How did I get to be this way?” and “Are other people in my family the same way?” Of course, you may decide to demonstrate using an incident that will resonate for your students. For example, you might have written an entry about a time when you really, really wanted a bike (after all, everyone else had

one) and finally got one. In the margin of this entry, you might show students that you write ideas such as “not having as much money as my friends” and “peer pressure” and “gifts that I have really liked” and “adventures on my bike.” Again, though, you will want to show students that you reread and decided that one of those topics/blob ideas mattered to you, and so you circled a key word, perhaps “adventure,” and then did more writing-to-learn about that subtopic.

If you began the year with memoir writing, students may have already been engaged in this process, but it’s likely, given that it was the first unit, that your students were (in some cases) new to each other and to you and that the truths they were finding through writing were safer truths, more cliché. Beginning-of-the-year writing is more likely to sound like “I need my friends to feel strong” and less likely to sound like “I change how I act to please the people I’m with.” The first truth is not untenable, nor is it simple, but the second statement is a more vulnerable one and is more likely to yield more original, peculiarly personal writing. Now that you’ve built some trust with the kids through time and a cycle of writing and reading together, you might model pushing toward ideas about themselves that may be a bit more self-critical. The only way to succeed in this is to be willing to model it in your own demonstration writing, naming it as you go.

If one day you teach students to collect small moments and think off of them in that sort of a way, another day you might teach writers that some essayists begin instead with big ideas. Writers can simply put a name on the top of the page of a writer’s notebook—perhaps someone else’s name or their own name—and begin jotting big ideas that they have about that person or about themselves. For instance, a student might jot “Nana” and then list big ideas she has about her: “It is hard to watch the strongest person in your life become needy. My grandmother is teaching me that few things matter more than family ties. . . .” After listing ideas in such a manner, writers can either shift to collecting small moment stories related to one of those ideas or take one of those ideas and generate new thinking around that idea. For example, after circling the jotted note “It must be hard to get older and not be able to do things for yourself,” you could list, “One time I saw my grandmother drop a water glass because she just couldn’t hold on to it.” Your goal is not just to channel students to write about ideas; it is also to help them move fluidly back and forth between collecting small moments that demonstrate ideas and elaborating on those ideas.

You might make direct connections here (perhaps in a mid-workshop teaching point) to what you’ve been teaching in reading, reminding them that just as readers search for more precise, nuanced language in describing characters, writers also push to get to more subtle descriptions of their subjects. You could model this kind of notebook entry for them, writing at first that you might describe yourself as “shy” and “reserved” but then right away revise this to say, “I’m not just shy; I’m really someone who cares deeply about what people think. I don’t want to say the wrong thing in social situations, so I often don’t say anything at all.” A strategy chart from the character unit supporting your readers in growing theories about characters would serve as an excellent resource to help your writers to grow theories about themselves.

Remind students of how they've been looking for inconsistencies in characters as a way to deepen their understanding of fictional worlds and lives. Writers can look for inconsistencies in their own inner and outer lives: they can study times when they themselves acted "out of character," reflect on the fact that they act one way with their friends and a totally different way with their family, write the story of moments when they felt one way but said or acted differently to cover up those inner thoughts. They then write to explore what these inconsistencies might mean. You might also have students pause at the end of reading workshop time to look back over the Post-its they've written about their characters. Writers can certainly use their reading lives as springboards for ideas about themselves. You might suggest bringing over to writing workshop post-its that remind your essayists of issues they're dealing with in their own lives. If a reader has a Post-it about Joey Pigza, noticing that "Joey both does and doesn't want to be like his dad," that same reader could bring the Post-it to writing workshop and use a similar idea for her own work: "I both do and don't want to be like my best friend."

By the end of a day or two of this sort of work, you can expect all your students to have decided upon the blob idea or the terrain they'll explore in their essay: an idea about themselves or someone they know well that has yet to be fully explored. (Example: I hold back what I'm really thinking when I'm in a group.) This is a far cry from having settled upon a thesis statement. You'll want the thesis to emerge after another two days (and evenings) exploring this chosen terrain. But their essays will be more insightful and deeper if they settle on a general terrain fairly early on in the process of writing the essay, *Writing to Develop More Thinking around a Chosen Terrain*. Now that your kids have a terrain that they know they want to focus on, you will help them play with this idea, to stretch it and figure out what's really at stake, so that when it's time to craft a thesis statement, your writers will be more equipped to articulate something less obvious and more reflective. Imagine that students will spend two days writing-to-learn, before deciding upon their thesis statement and crafting a plan for their essay.

As students write entries in which they attempt to grow ideas around their chosen topic, you'll want to watch the problems they encounter and be ready to help them with those problems. For writers who struggle to elaborate when they are writing about ideas, it will help if you are ready to give them tools to push past their first thoughts. Many teachers have found it incredibly helpful to teach these students to use "thought prompts" to prime the pump of their ideas. Once a student records an idea, the student can use a thought prompt to get himself or herself saying more. Earlier in this write-up, we mentioned the power of the sentence starter, "The thought I have about this is . . ." It is equally powerful to equip students with follow-up sentence starters, such as "In other words . . ." or "That is . . ." or "The surprising thing about this is . . ." or "This makes me realize . . ." or "To add on. . . ." You'll notice students begin to extend their first ideas and to use writing as a way of thinking. In *Breathing Life into Essays* Session IV, you'll find a list of these thought prompts (set within a minilesson), which you can adapt in order to teach writers to use these prompts.



You can set writers up for this work with partners, where one partner is “the thinker” and one is “the prompter,” and they mimic your demonstration. Of course, then students will need to go on to do this work on their own in their notebooks, and they will need to be their own “prompter,” taking thought prompts (or sentence starters) from a list and using them to keep themselves thinking and writing. All of this work will help later on in the unit when you ask kids to elaborate their thinking as they draft. This should also draw directly on the partner work they are practicing in the character unit, since they should be used to helping their partners to say more as a way to grow ideas about the characters in their books.

You may teach your essayists that, just as in reading workshop, they are thinking about how certain objects tell us a lot about a character’s emotional reality. A writer can focus on objects related to the theory she has developed about herself (a security blanket she has had since she was a baby, say, for a writer writing about herself and her insecurity), and then the writer jots ideas about that object and how it connects to the big idea she’s developing for an essay. If you demonstrate this strategy, show writers again how to write before they have an idea of what they will say, using freewriting to generate ideas, and show them they can again use phrases such as “The thought I have about this is . . .” or “This makes me realize. . . .” For the student who has decided to write about herself and who focuses on her blanket, she might write that she feels at ease when she has her blanket. Then her writing may take a turn and address how she covers her true self in order to fit in. This might lead to yet more related thoughts in a stream-of-consciousness sort of way. Once a writer gets started writing about an idea, she must take that idea and roll it out in her mind and on the page. The goal, for now, is not especially wonderful writing; it’s writing-to-learn, yabbering on the paper.

It is important to emphasize that during this brief early phase of the writing process, when students are writing entries to grow ideas, their entries will not look like miniature essays. The student writing about the blanket will not have written one paragraph about the appearance of the blanket, one about the feeling of security she gets from the blanket, and so on, in an organized, logical fashion. Instead, this writer may have rambled from writing about the places where the blanket is beginning to fray where she always grips it, to remembering a night when there was a thunderstorm and she couldn’t fall asleep because her blanket was in the laundry, to jotting topics about how she feels like hiding under her blanket in social situations. During this phase of the unit, your emphasis will instead be on teaching writers to freewrite in their notebooks. The goal is to help kids realize the value of writing at length without a preconceived content, trusting that ideas will surface as they go along. You will be helping them write ideas that are original, provocative, interesting, fresh, insightful. You will also help them reach for the precise words to capture their thoughts and, for your most advanced students, to use metaphors for thoughts that don’t easily fit into ordinary words. If some students seem to struggle to grasp what it means to write about ideas, not facts, the teaching share in Session III of *Breathing Life into Essays* can help you clarify the difference between a fact and an idea.



You will want to coach students to recognize that as writers collect jots and notebook entries around a topic, many of these will support one main opinion. At some point in your unit, you may want to suggest that writers can use examples from the books they have been reading during the reading workshop to develop their point. You might begin this by saying something like “Writers, I realized last night, as I was preparing the read-aloud for today, that there is a connection between what Rob is going through and what I’ve been writing about in my essay work.” (You will have had to plan for this, so that the idea you are developing in your demonstration essay work is one supportable with passages from a book that you and the students have shared. It doesn’t have to be your current read-aloud, but the kids do have to know the text.) You could say something like “Rob bottles up his feelings so he doesn’t have to think about them. I’ve been writing about how I hide what I’m thinking from others because I’m so scared they won’t like what I have to say.”

Remember, all of the generating work plus the development of ideas will be shoe-horned into just the first week of this unit. This means that the work on thought prompts may, for example, end up as small-group work for those students needing this help. And it means that you will probably spend only one or two days generating ideas—you can certainly use mid-workshops and shares as opportunities to showcase different strategies. Your students, of course, can also think of their own wonderful ways to collect ideas and anecdotes.

## **Part Two: Teach Writers to Choose an Idea, to Write It as a Thesis, and to Build the Structure for the Essay**

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By the fourth or fifth day of this unit, you’ll want to remind your students that the next step for an essay writer is to draft a seed idea, also known in this instance as a thesis statement or claim, and to plan their essay, designing their infrastructure. You’ll try to do that work within a day, but it may spill beyond that time. (Just to help you orient yourself, after students draft and revise their thesis statements, they’ll collect ingredients to combine into essays, devoting a day or so to each of the kinds of things that they’ll probably write. By day nine or so, you’ll remind writers about endings, beginnings, and transitional phrases and help them select their most powerful material to tack together into a draft.) The planning is truly the heart of the unit, because what happens here will determine if the kids can truly go forward with essays that flow or if they’re going to be stuck with an idea that may be meaningful but doesn’t lend itself to elaboration in a way that they can handle. This is clearly Common Core State Standards-aligned work, since your young writers will “create an organizational structure in which ideas are logically grouped to support the writer’s purpose.” The bulk of your work at this stage is to coach students into a felt sense of what logical structure will best support the claim they are making.

Depending on your students’ experience with personal essays, they will know that the most fruitful seed ideas are those that seem especially important, fresh, and worth

developing. In this unit of study, teach your students to write claims that are based on interpretations of their own lives. Teach your students to consider, “What do I really want to say about myself and the kind of person I am?” Teach your students possible ways these claims might go, such as “I’m the kind of person who. . . .” “I used to think I was . . . , but now I’m realizing I’m really. . . .” “My family might think I’m . . . , but really I’m. . . .” and “My role in my family is. . . .” You can refer to Session VI in *Breathing Life into Essays* for support in helping students write thesis statements. The lesson in Session VIII teaches students how to revise possible thesis statements with the purpose of matching more specifically what they want to say in the essay.

Students will reread all they have written and box out a claim, an idea. You may suggest they rewrite this claim six or eight times, trying to consolidate it, to clarify it. To do this, however, they also need to be imagining a plan for the essay as a whole, because the plan for the essay often influences the claim. To help students plan the essay, you can remind them that when they wrote narratives, they used timelines, story mountains, or mini-books to plan out the sequence of what they would write. When writing essays, it is equally important to plan out the sequence, but this time planning the sequence will involve categories or sections or reasons. The process of “synthesizing and analyzing complex ideas” into a multiparagraph composition demonstrates cognitive complexity that reaches Level 4 on Webb’s Depth of Knowledge chart. This is why this is a crucial step, which will demand much coaching and small-group work, while students will be working on different kinds of thesis statements. Once students have selected and articulated an idea (“Holding in my real thoughts only makes me feel more alone,” for example), you will want to teach them to think about the categories they’ll include in their essays.

During this planning day or days, your students will each craft a main idea (a claim or a thesis) and several parallel supporting ideas. Teachers sometimes refer to the main idea and supporting statements as “boxes and bullets.” The most common way to do this is for the writer to make a claim (“Holding in my real thoughts only makes me feel more alone”) and then list reasons for that claim, with each reason as a bullet, a topic sentence for another portion of the essay. Don’t worry if kids don’t have three supports; two is just as good. When teaching writers to write in this way, it works best if you encourage writers to restate the claim over and over, each time adding the transitional word *because* followed by a reason. (You will teach them how to revise to eliminate redundancy later.)

Holding in my real thoughts only makes me feel more alone.

- Holding in my real thoughts only makes me feel more alone because then no one can ever connect with my ideas.
- Holding in my real thoughts only makes me feel more alone because I don’t give my friends a chance to help me when I’m feeling down.

- Holding in my real thoughts only makes me feel more alone because people can end up thinking I'm unfriendly.

If your writers have chosen two-part thesis statements, such as "I used to think it's a good idea to stay quiet in big groups, but now I realize that staying quiet can prevent me from connecting," you will want to teach them to use that two-part structure as the organizing framework for their essay. Topic sentences and supporting evidence for this would look like:

I used to think my dad wasn't a warm person, but now I realize that he's just shy, even in our family.

- I used to think my dad wasn't a warm person.
- Now I realize that he's just shy, even in our family.

Another structure that helps writers to write an essay that explores multiple angles goes like this: "My thoughts about \_\_\_\_\_ are complicated." This essay, then, can proceed to say, "On the one hand, I think . . ." and "On the other hand, I think. . . ." That will work best if the two sides of the idea are parallel to each other.

My thoughts about team sports are complicated.

- On the one hand, they are fun to play.
- On the other hand, they are competitive and stress me out.

If essay writing is new for students, we have found it helps if students take their thesis and record it on the outside of a folder, then make smaller internal folders for each of their bullets (topic sentences), and proceed to collect a small pile of papers within each folder. After a few days of collecting and revising the small pile, a student will spread out the contents of each small folder, select the best material for that body paragraph, and rewrite the selected material into that body paragraph. This is described in the *Unit of Study* book in Session IX. This work can be done in a fashion that detours around the folders, with writers essentially developing each of their "bullets" on a different sheet of paper. The main problem with bypassing the folders is that such a plan generally means that writers postpone revision until they are revising large swatches of text, which often leads them to do little revision and therefore to not ratchet up their skills as much as they otherwise would do.

## Part Three: Gathering Material for an Essay, Selecting the Most Compelling and Appropriate Material, and Constructing a Draft

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When it is time to teach students to collect materials to support their topic sentences, you will probably want to remind them that they can first collect microstories that illustrate their ideas, some of which they have undoubtedly already written in their notebooks. As part of this instruction, you'll want to also teach students to angle these stories so they highlight and support the idea the writers want to advance and to learn to "unpack" those stories, just as a teacher debriefs after a demonstration in a minilesson. *Breathing Life into Essays* Sessions IX and X are minilessons that will help you teach this. After teaching students that writers sometimes collect angled stories, students will have a lot of opportunities to practice this technique and become proficient at it because they will collect angled stories within each of their folders, substantiating each of their topic sentences. They also, of course, may revise these in order to bring out the point they want to make. Keep in mind that during one day of a writing workshop, a student will need to collect (and ideally revise) at least three angled stories, filing these in the appropriate folder. It would most certainly not be considered a day's work for a student to write one tiny anecdote supporting one of the student's two or three topic sentences! Furthermore, if students take a day to write an anecdote illustrating one of their topic sentences, chances are good that the narrative will overwhelm the rest of the essay. Generally, within essays, writers write with tight, small anecdotes.

Essayists "unpack" their microstories by adding a sentence or two after the story in which they discuss how the story illustrates the main idea. A little boy wrote about how glad he was that his father taught him skating tricks. Then he wrote a story about watching his father do a 360-degree turn and then trying it himself. The boy's story ended, "I came into the boys' bathroom with blood on my head." The story was totally transformed when this young writer added the line, "I'm still thinking about how glad I was my father had taught me to do the 360-degree turns." Your writers should be used to doing this work in reverse during partner talk and perhaps even in short response writing in reading workshop; there they are typically moving from an idea about a character and then coming up with an example from the text that supports that idea. Make this connection clear so your students see the transference.

Because your students have been working hard during reading workshop to think deeply about the characters in their books, it should be an easy transition to suggest that examples from their characters' lives could become support for their thesis statement claims. If a student is writing an essay with the thesis, "I don't let bullies change how I am," and one paragraph is devoted to the topic sentence, "I don't let bullies change the way I think," it would be natural for this writer to include a connection to Sistine in *The Tiger Rising*. You can teach writers to do this by demonstrating some connecting sentence starters, such as "I'm reminded of \_\_\_\_\_ in \_\_\_\_\_," or "\_\_\_\_\_ in \_\_\_\_\_ also shows this same characteristic," or "I recognized this same tendency in \_\_\_\_\_ when I read \_\_\_\_\_." After such a transition, writers can then provide an angled

retelling of a moment in the book when a character shows the same quality that the writer herself is describing in the essay.

To support their topic sentences, writers can also collect lists, or quotes, or statistics, or other students' stories, depending on their thesis statements. Many teachers use Martin Luther King's *I Have a Dream* speech as a model text for these lists. This is specifically described in Session XI. Although you will probably not have time to teach a full minilesson on this, in a small group or during a mid-workshop teaching point you might show students how statistics, observations, citations, quotations, and so forth can enrich their work. When you coach students, you will want to help them select *compelling* evidence from the material they collect in these folders and also help them to ensure that the evidence closely supports their claim. Eventually, you will need to teach writers to sort through the materials in each folder, writing well-structured paragraphs.

Once writers have selected the most powerful and pertinent support material for each of their topic sentences, they will probably staple or tape or recopy this information into a paragraph or two that support each topic sentence and, in this manner, construct the rough draft of the body of an essay with a bare-bones introduction that is at this point just a thesis statement. You will also want to teach them that writers look over our material to decide what we have and figure out the best way to order that material to good effect. This is important because for fifth grade the Common Core State Standards make clear that the support paragraphs should be "logically ordered," that is, not randomly sequenced. Of course, this is revisable later, but it's best to be thoughtful as early as possible.

This may be an occasion for some of your advanced writers to break out of the tightly structured expository framework to better match the material they have gathered. For example, if a writer has a single story that makes his point in an especially powerful way, he may decide to let the essay revolve mostly around that one story. He will then write (or rewrite) the story to be sure it carries the idea and will then mine that one story for insights and big ideas. If your students are proficient enough that you want them to understand the breadth and flexibility of essays, and if they are not under any compulsion to create thesis-driven five-paragraph essays, then you'll probably want to show them that as they draft and revise their essays, they make decisions based on the material they have on hand. But if you want to help writers produce competent, well-structured essays quickly, you may decide to stay within the boxes-and-bullets paradigm.

## Teach Essayists to Revise for Flow, for Coherence, and for Impact on the Reader

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Now is the time to roll up your sleeves: the hardest work is probably yet to come. At this point, students will have somewhat Frankenstein-like drafts of essays: a cobbled-together array of evidence inside (let's hope!) fairly sturdy containers that are the beginnings of body paragraphs. But now comes the important work of smoothing

this out. There are several strategies you may want to offer over the three or four days that you spend in this work.

The introduction to the essay is critical: it's the writer's first chance to engage a reader in this topic and to make that person want to keep reading. The Common Core State Standards explicitly call for this. You might have students pick a powerful anecdote (one that they have not yet used in their body paragraphs, or one they can replace) and to begin the essay with a small angled story that leads up to their thesis statement. The art of this practice is in telling the story so well that the imagined reader might not even need to have the thesis spelled out but should be able to infer through the details in the anecdote. Even still, the writer will want to follow up the anecdote with a transition that makes even more clear the connection between the story and the big idea of the essay. Some possibilities might be: "This scene and so many others like it have made me realize . . ." or "When I reflect on this incident and others like it, I have to admit. . . ." Of course, there are other ways to introduce a powerful essay: a quote that connects directly to the thesis; writing that details how the writer came to this idea; or even a connection to a fictional character—one that is not already being mined for evidence in a body paragraph. Conclusions, which use some of these same methods to connect the reader to the urgency of the thesis, to the big idea of it, can often be taught as a mid-workshop the same day as introductions, although many related conferring and small groups will follow.

Within each body paragraph, writers may have selected several pieces of evidence to include. Now is the time to help them manage these bits of text. Help them understand that writers reconsider their evidence as they reread their drafts and sometimes take out parts that no longer seem to matter, or they decide that more must be written to fully support the topic sentence and, therefore, the thesis. At this point there may be an increase in the amount of partner work, as partners can help each other notice where parts aren't fitting together within a paragraph or where a transitional phrase may signal a transition that isn't actually there!

If your students have chosen to use examples from literature as evidence, you will need to give support to small groups on how to appropriately work in this text evidence. Teach them that writers retell a small scene in an angled way, popping out the details that match the bigger idea. If a writer's thesis is "I don't stand up for myself when I'm feeling threatened," he may choose to connect to the bus scene from *The Tiger Rising*. This writer will want to "pop out" or explicitly show how Rob, much like the writer himself, is both feeling threatened and not standing up for himself. One way to pop this out is to teach writers to write what the character could have done but didn't: "He could have fought back," the writer might say, "but instead just let them beat him up." The writer will do well to focus on one or two key images from the scene, not recounting everything but also not summarizing so that powerful details are lost. Then, too, you will want to offer your writers demonstrations and mentor texts (which could stay in their folders so they can use them as models) that teach the conventions of citation. This is a chance to practice some of the reading standards of the Common Core State Standards, which call for fifth graders to be able to "quote



accurately from a text.” You could be moving some students toward the sixth-grade standard of being able to “cite textual evidence to support analysis.”

After several days of revision, you will ask your writers to set these first essays aside for now, as they will be moving to another, quicker essay (perhaps two more!) and will have an opportunity at the end of the unit to decide which essay to bring to publication.

## **Part Four: Students Turn Their Writers' Eyes to Their Reading— A Quick Cycle in Interpretive Essays Focused on Characters**

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Teachers, if you decide to encourage your students to do this next round of essay writing, you will lean heavily on the instruction and practices developed in the character unit of your reading workshop. Meanwhile, you will be supporting students' continued progression along the continuum of opinion writing, aligning this work with the Common Core State Standards writing standards.

The essay we suggest your students write will not quite be an on-demand but will be close to it, in that there will not be much teaching toward generating and developing. The bulk of your instruction will be toward assisting students with the tricky art of bringing in relevant, evocative textual evidence to support a claim. The essays will have almost exactly the same structures as the ones your writers just completed; the difference is that their thesis statements, instead of being focused on ideas about themselves, will now be about characters from literature.

Only one day need be spent for both generating and developing. You will essentially ask students to look through their reader's notebooks and Post-its from reading workshop and to choose a few ideas about characters that they think might be worth working on longer and developing into an essay. As a mid-workshop teaching point, you could review strategies for writing-to-learn to help them write to process the ideas a bit more. By the end of day one, however, they should have not only a terrain but the idea within that terrain that will become a thesis the next day.

The second day will be a chance for students to go through the planning process, this time with a character-centered thesis. The types of thesis statement remain constant:

- Claim and reasons: Rob keeps his feelings in because he doesn't want to be vulnerable, because his dad does too, and because he doesn't know how to act another way.
- Two-part: Rob used to keep his feelings in, but Sistine teaches him to open up.
- Multiangle: Rob's feelings about Sistine are complicated. Rob admires Sistine. But he also is frightened by her.

You will then teach students to quickly assemble evidence within each body paragraph—either scenes that they will craft into anecdotes or lists of examples that support the claim in each paragraph. You will note that this feels different because it's quicker,

but also reassure them that they've already done the thinking for this in their reading work. They should be well versed in "finding evidence" to match a claim. We recommend collecting the student drafts at this juncture and quickly deciding on the teaching that will best help students going forward. For example, if students are already writing angled retellings well, there is no need to spend whole-class time on this. Revision work, which might span one to two days, will most likely focus on elaboration—writing to explain *how* a particular scene from the book supports the essayist's claim about the character. It is key that you get to this point, as it is the work they have done through talk in the reading workshop but have not had much practice in putting into writing. And it is a skill that they will need for the remainder of their academic careers.

A small-group lesson for advanced writers might focus on developing a body paragraph devoted to a counterclaim. If the thesis is "Holding his feelings in is hurting Rob," an essayist could push to find a counterargument. The topic sentence for this paragraph might be, "Some might say that Rob actually should hold his feelings in." In literature that is complex, there is often evidence on either side of such an argument. The writer could include passages that show why Rob is driven to hold his feelings in and point out that from a certain standpoint it makes sense for him to continue doing so. In a final sentence in this paragraph, however, writers generally turn the counterclaim back around: "Although it's true there are real reasons for him to act this way, the author shows us over and over again how this is hurting Rob, not helping him."

## **An Optional Part: Writing Essays That Develop Ideas or Life-Lessons Drawn from Multiple Characters, Texts, and Possibly Personal Experience**

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A final essay structure you might teach this year, either to a whole class of strong essayists or to a small group who are ready for something new and who are clearly engaged in the reading unit, is an essay that develops an idea, a theme, or a life-lesson that holds true across multiple characters' lives, perhaps also including the essayist's life as well. As the character unit reaches its final part, readers are beginning to push themselves to think about how ideas live in more than one book and apply to more than one character. It makes sense, then, to invite your students to try out some of this thinking, using a big idea they have noticed in their reading and that cuts across multiple sources. This work is important because it connects to the "compare and contrast" work that is a major thread in the CCSS, and because it previews cross-text work that you will teach into during the test prep unit later in the year.

If you don't get a chance to teach this here, we've also included this work in the literary essay half of the March/April unit, just preceding test prep.

To teach into this, you might introduce the idea by saying, "Writers, in reading workshop, we just had an amazing conversation where we realized that one life-lesson we learned from *The Tiger Rising* also applies to *The Year the Swallows Came Early*, by Kathryn Fitzmaurice, although in different ways. We're going to try writing a third

essay, one that focuses on a theme or a life-lesson that we notice in more than one text, and possibly in our own lives as well.”

The kinds of thesis statements you can expect and that you might demonstrate are:

Kathryn Fitzmaurice in *The Year the Swallows Came Early* and Kate DiCamillo in *The Tiger Rising* both teach us that trying to bury your feelings will only hurt you in the end.

- In *The Year the Swallows Came Early*, Eleanor finds that holding in her feelings about her father only keeps her from connecting to her mother.
- In *The Tiger Rising* by Kate DiCamillo, Rob learns that trying to hide his sadness only makes him feel more alone.

These essays might then consist of two body paragraphs, but some writers might want to add either a third text or a paragraph connecting the theme to their own experiences. As with the last essay, you will expect and prompt students to develop their boxes-and-bullets outline quickly, given that the idea that will become the central claim should be migrating over from reading workshop with much talk and thinking and Post-it work behind it.

The body paragraph revision lessons you might choose here, if you are not revisiting teaching points that still need shoring up from the character-based essay (which you very well may be!), could show students how literary essayists (this is a form of literary essay at this point) write not only to describe the theme itself but to analyze how an author succeeds in getting this theme across. When looking across texts, it becomes natural to discuss how one author’s treatment of a theme differs from another author’s treatment of the same theme. This corresponds to a Common Core State Standards reading standard asking fifth graders to compare and contrast “stories in the same genre on their approaches to similar themes and topics.” It’s important, therefore, to support students in the work of not just naming the theme but noticing how an author “approaches” this theme. In *The Tiger Rising*, then, an essayist could comment on the choice of DiCamillo to give Rob a rash as a way to show that something inside him is trying to get out. Similarly, in *The Year the Swallows Came Early*, Fitzmaurice uses an earthquake at the end of the book as a fitting metaphor for an upheaval, for the letting loose of something that has been trapped, like Eleanor’s feelings for her father. Comparing key scenes, repeated images, or patterns across texts will be fruitful ways for writers to approach this work.

## Part Five: A Celebration of Reading and Writing

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At the end of this unit, you will want to find a way to value the reading and the writing work of this packed month. Perhaps students will set up a gallery walk with their

reading books and Post-its displayed next to the essay they choose to bring to publication. There will be other ways for you to showcase this work, and students will certainly have ideas as well. The main point will be to find a way for your kids to showcase the connections they made across the month and to let others in on the thinking and writing that they've worked so hard at!

## Editing and Word Study to Support Writing Workshop

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This time of year is a good time to do a quick informal assessment by looking across kids' independent writing to see which high-frequency words many kids continue to misspell. Even if you already introduced those words as word wall words, you may revisit them again and again until most of your children have begun to spell them correctly in their independent writing.

Now that your year is well underway, it is a good time to raise the bar on your students' grammar expectations. Essay writing presents some unique challenges for verb tense usage: often students are moving between idea writing, which is often in the present tense—"I'm torn between loving New York and missing Colorado"—and writing anecdotes of remembered experience, which will likely be narrated in the past tense—"I remember the last time I was home in Denver. Saying good-bye at the airport was devastating." This switching between present and past tense, which is fine as long as the idea writing stays in the present and the remembered story stays in the past, might offer new opportunities to clarify these tenses. For English Language Learners who are in early stages of language acquisition, this might be particularly tricky, as mastery of past tense often develops later.

This is also the perfect time to revisit paragraphing of new ideas. Expository writing provides an opportunity to remind children about when and where to use paragraphs to signal a new idea. In addition, students are ready to investigate abstract vocabulary that signals connections: *and, thus, furthermore, rather*; compares or contrasts a viewpoint: *however, on the other hand*; or interjections used to advance an idea: *or, yet*.

Finally, the Common Core State Standards for fifth grade expect students to use appropriate conventions when citing the title of a book or a story. When your students are referring to the literature they're reading, you will want to prompt them to underline or italicize book titles and to use quotation marks to indicate the title of a story or a poem.

## Additional Resources

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Teachers, before beginning this unit you will want to assess what your students already know about essay writing. By using the TCRWP Continuum for Assessing Opinion Writing, you will get a sense of this. You will want to look carefully at their on-demand essays and notice whether they demonstrate an understanding of how

essays go—that an essay begins by introducing a claim, not a statement of fact—and whether this introductory claim is followed by paragraphs of support, organized so that each paragraph itself has a topic sentence and relevant evidence, connected by transitional phrases. If none or very little of this is visible in your students’ work, you may wish to turn to the write-up for personal and persuasive essays in the fourth-grade 2011–2012 writing curricular calendar. This unit is designed to coach students in a more automated development of essay outlines and in more sophisticated elaboration of their evidence.

The following teaching points represent one possible path for this unit. Because there are multiple cycles of essay work described in this write-up, you will want to decide how long you wish to spend on each kind of essay (or, in fact, if you want to go through two cycles or only one). This set of teaching points charts a path where you stay longer in the first essay, which is an interpretation of the writer’s own life or one the writer knows well. Should you wish to spend more time in the second essay, based on character interpretation in reading, you will want to move more quickly through this first part, in essence flipping the emphasis from the first to the second essay cycle. This also charts a packed month—you will likely need to cut some things to make room for reteaching and responding to your kids’ innovations.

In Part One and Part Two, you will be looking for engagement, stamina, and clarity of thinking in your students’ work. If enthusiasm is falling, if their ideas are not touching on life issues that are significant, if they are still writing mostly narrative entries that do not crystallize into reflections—you may wish to spend more time in these parts to get this work on track. *Breathing Life into Essays* offers many lessons that are not included in these teaching points to support generating and developing ideas, as well as clarifying thesis statements and outlines.

In Part Three, you will need to decide how much revision you want to accomplish now versus returning to revision after the character interpretation essay and inviting students to revise across both essays. The teaching points that follow take you through several revision lessons before moving on to the character unit. If you feel your students’ drafts are in pretty good shape, you may choose to save these lessons until later, thereby showing them that revision lessons can apply across different kinds of essays.

In Part Four, you will lean heavily on your reading workshop for support in bringing over ideas. If your students have not been developing rich interpretations of characters, talking through theories about characters and finding evidence for those theories, your students will need much more time to come to a thesis statement and supports. If this is so, or if you notice they are having trouble making the transfer of these ideas from reading to writing, you will want to spend more time teaching into the development of accountable ideas about characters.

Finally, in Part Five you will bring with you your knowledge of what your kids’ needs and strengths are in spelling and grammar, adding lessons and small-group work that will move them toward meeting fifth-grade standards in conventions and spelling. (Teaching points in bold refer directly to *Breathing Life into Essays*, by Calkins and Gillette, from the *Units of Study for Teaching Writing, Grades 3–5*.)

## One Possible Sequence of Teaching Points

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### Part One: Starting Work toward an Interpretive Essay— Generating Ideas about Ourselves or Someone Close to Us

- “In writing workshop, we’re going to be growing ideas about ourselves or about people we know and care about, just the way we’re growing ideas about our characters in reading workshop. Today I want to teach you that just as we’ve been paying attention to key scenes in our novels and thinking, ‘What does this scene say about who this character really is?’ essayists sometimes use this same strategy to get ideas about their own lives. We can think back to a moment in our life, quickly write it down, and then ask: ‘What does this show about me? What kind of person would act in this way?’ Then we can jot down an idea to try out and write long about.”
  - *Mid-workshop teaching point:* “I noticed that some of you are feeling stuck after coming to an idea. I want to teach you a way to keep writing once you have a theory going. Essayists ask questions of themselves to test out an idea, and they push to write answers to those questions in their notebooks. Just as we ask questions about our characters, we can ask questions about ourselves: ‘Why do I act this way? When have I not seemed like this? How did I get to be this way?’”
  - *Teaching share:* “As writers, we push ourselves to write not only from what we’ve just written but also from ideas and moments we recorded days, weeks, and months earlier. I often reread my old writing, find an entry I care about, and write *another* entry in which I reflect on and think about the first one. This is a way for writing to grow like the rings of a tree, with layers of insight and thoughtfulness.” (Session V)
- “I have been reading your Post-its from reading workshop and thinking, ‘Wow, these kids are really pushing themselves to think in complicated ways about their characters.’ Today I want to teach you that essayists can look to their writing about reading and try the same work to come up with essay ideas.”
  - *Mid-workshop teaching point:* “We just finished publishing our memoirs, and at the beginning of the year, we used many strategies to come up with areas of our lives worth writing about. When we write essays (instead of memoirs), we tailor familiar strategies so that now we come up with material that will lead us to this new kind of writing.” (Session I)
  - *Homework:* “Tonight, read over all of your entries and think: ‘What idea about my life or another person has generated the most and the best writing?’ Come to class tomorrow ready to write more to explore that idea. Try out another entry tonight.”



## Part Two: Writing to Develop More Thinking around a Chosen Terrain, Develop a Thesis and Structure, and Gather Evidence

- “Today I want to teach you that essayists write long to uncover new thinking. We write to push past our first thoughts about ourselves. Once we’ve chosen an idea to think through, we can try to say more and more about that idea, all the way down the page. We can use sentence starters when we’re stuck to prompt new thoughts: ‘In other words . . . What I’m thinking about this is . . . This makes me realize. . . .’”
  - ▮ *Mid-workshop teaching point:* “As essayists, we know that ideas about our own lives are complicated. We can try out some thinking that shows this complication. We can write: ‘I used to think . . . , but now I realize . . .’ or ‘My thoughts about \_\_\_\_\_ are complicated.’”
- “Writers, I realized as I was preparing for read-aloud today that there is a connection between the character in that story and what I’ve been writing about myself in my essay work. Today I want to teach you that another way essayists write to think through an idea is by connecting to fiction. We can write about a character who feels the same way we do or has a similar character flaw, and that will bring us to new thinking about this idea. Today I want to teach you that essayists choose the most interesting, fresh idea that they’ve had to craft a thesis statement. We can ask, ‘What do I really want to say about myself and the kind of person that I am?’ We can remember from reading workshop how people are not always what they seem, and we can try to choose a seed idea about ourselves or another person that gets behind the surface and shows something true and harder to see.”
  - ▮ *Mid-workshop teaching point:* “Essayists write just a sentence or two that state the idea that we want to develop: this becomes our thesis statement. Then we try on a few of these thesis statements for size.” (Minilesson, Session VI)
- “Today I am going to teach you that essay writers, unlike narrative writers, do not make a timeline or a story mountain and then progress straight into drafting. Instead we often pause at this point to plan (or frame) the main sections of our essay. We plan the sections of our essay by deciding how we will elaborate on our main idea. One way this can look is we can box out our idea and then list reasons why this idea is true.” (Session VII)
  - ▮ “I’m the kind of person who . . . .”
    - Reason
    - Reason
    - Reason
  - ▮ *Mid-workshop teaching point:* “Different kinds of thesis statements will need different structures to support them. If our idea has more than one part to it,

we'll need support for each part of that idea. We can show that by making a bullet to go with each part of the idea."

■ "I used to think . . . , but now I realize. . . ."

- "I used to think. . . ."
- "But now I realize. . . ."

■ "My thoughts about \_\_\_\_\_ are complicated."

- "On the one hand, I think. . . ."
- "On the other hand, I think. . . ."

■ "Today I want to teach you that essayists collect stories as evidence to go inside of each body paragraph. In the same way that in reading workshop we've been finding 'text evidence' for our ideas about characters, now we can find 'life evidence': moments in our lives that truly show what our thesis statement says."

■ *Mid-workshop teaching point:* "Today I want to teach you that writers of essays are collectors, collecting not only our stories but also stories of others, as long as these stories illustrate our main ideas. We can turn to the lives of our characters and retell scenes where characters acted in a similar way, or learned a similar lesson about themselves, as the idea we are writing about our own life. 'I'm reminded of . . . ' we might begin. Or 'I recognized this characteristic in \_\_\_\_\_.'"

■ "Today I want to teach you that when writing essays, writers sometimes collect examples that we do not stretch out and tell as stories but that we instead list." (Session XI)

■ *Teaching share:* "Today I want to teach you that essayists revisit their thesis statement and plan as they gather evidence. We can change the focus of our thesis slightly, or cut one part from our plan, if we are not finding evidence that truly supports our idea or that part of our idea."

### **Part Three: Drafting and Revising Interpretive Essays about Our Own Lives**

■ "Today I want to teach you that after writers plan and collect for our essays (as you have done), the day comes to put everything together. Once a writer has planned and collected, then presto! The pieces of the essay can rise into place. It won't be finished—writers revise essays just like we revise any other kind of writing. But in the space of a single day, you can go from a bunch of entries in some folders to a rough draft of an essay. Today I will teach you how to do that." (Session XIV)

■ *Mid-workshop teaching point:* "Today I'm going to teach you that writers put materials together by using a couple of techniques. First, we arrange the

writing pieces in an order that we choose for a reason. And second, we use key words from our theses in our topic sentences like cement between bricks, holding one bit of material onto the next.”

- “Today you’ll continue to cement your selected material into paragraphs, but I know you will also want to learn a bit about how essayists write introductions and closings for our essays. Specifically, I want to teach you that essay writers often use the beginning of an essay as a place to convey to readers that the ideas in the essay are important. The lead briefly places the essay into context.” (Session XVI)
- *Teaching share:* “Many of you were working not only on your body paragraphs today but also on your introductions. Let’s think for a moment about what we know about endings. We know from memoir that often the ending might circle back to thoughts or images from the introduction as a way to give closure. Some essayists use this structure as well. The important thing, though, is to leave the reader with your most important thoughts.”
- “Today I want to teach you that essayists use all we know about narrative writing to make the anecdotes in our body paragraphs come alive, but quickly. We can cut all but the most essential part of our stories and revise our writing so that the action, dialogue, or inner thinking really shows our thesis idea. We can do this across all the essays that we’ve written this month.”
- *Mid-workshop teaching point:* “Writers, some of you are using examples from your reading as a way to explore your idea in your essay. Today I want to teach you that just as we angled the stories from our lives to show the idea of our thesis, essayists retell a scene from literature making sure to pop out the part that really goes with the essay’s main idea and to cut out the other parts of the scene. We can start retelling right before the part that we have in mind, to set up a little context, but we’re careful not to retell everything, saving our stretched-out writing for the most important part.”
- *Partner share:* “Writers, let’s stop a minute. I’ve noticed in most of your writing that you’re working hard to explain the evidence in your body paragraphs. A lot of you are writing ‘This shows that . . .’ after you’ve told an anecdote, as a way to point back to your thesis statement. Right now I want to teach you some other ways essayists talk about their anecdotes. We can say, ‘When I remember this story, I think to myself . . .’ or ‘This moment clearly demonstrates . . .’ or even, ‘As a result of this moment and moments like it, I’ve . . .’ Try this with your partner.”
- *Possible small-group instruction for strong writers:* “Essayists play with alternate structures to showcase their evidence. If there is a single story that makes the point of the thesis in an especially powerful way, we may decide to return to a more memoir-like structure, with an introduction that introduces an idea, an

extended Small Moment story that shows (not tells) our point, and a conclusion that returns in a circular way, perhaps even with some repetition, to the idea from the introduction.”

#### **Part Four: A Quick Draft of a Character-Based Interpretive Essay and a Possible Introduction of Essays That Draw from Multiple Texts**

- “Writers, we’ve made first drafts and quickly revised essays interpreting our own lives—thinking about ourselves and asking: What kind of person am I? Now, before we learn more revision strategies, we’re going to practice this same kind of writing but turn our attention to the people in our books. Today I want to teach you that writers write about their reading, look back at all their on-the-run Post-its and jots, and pick an idea about a character to try on for essay writing.”
- “Today I want to teach you that essayists can use the same thesis and support structures to plan for an essay that interprets a character.”
  - *Tip:* “Have your chart from your read-aloud work at hand to show how any one of the ideas you’ve had in whole-class conversation about a character might become a thesis statement. Plan to include ideas that can be outlined as idea with reasons, two-part ideas, and complicated ideas.”
- “Writers, we’re going through this essay a bit more quickly than our last one, and I want to give you a lot of time for your own work today, so I’m going to give you just a quick reminder lesson of all you know about gathering evidence to go inside the parts of our essays. This time, because we’re writing about reading, most of our stories will be mini-scenes from our books!” (Refer to the chart regarding collecting anecdotes and making lists.)
  - *Partner share:* “Partners can help each other test out the evidence they’re gathering to see: Does this really show the thesis idea? Is this really, really connected, or does it feel kind of forced? Our partners who know the books we’re writing about can give us feedback and point out when we’re making a connection that feels right on, and when we’re pushing it and need to look again for a part that matches.”
- “Today I want to teach you that essayists work to show the reader not just what parts of the book go with the idea of the thesis but *how* those parts bring out this idea so well. We can use all we know from reading workshop and about narrative writing to help us talk about this: we make sure to use literary language in doing so, mentioning the *setting* and how the details of that setting

help us know how the character feels, or any objects or places that seem to be *symbols* of a bigger issue for our character, or the *dialogue* and how that gives us insight into characters' relationships."

- *Possible final part, likely for a small group:* "Essayists take big ideas or lessons from literature and write about how those ideas come through in different ways in more than one text. We've been talking in reading workshop about how the same themes or lessons keep coming up in different books. We can use essays to explore those ideas more. This structure will probably look like this:"

- ▶ *Idea:*

- How one text teaches us this idea
- How another text teaches us this idea in a different way

## **Part Five: Essayists Edit, Prepare for Publication, and Celebrate Their Work**

- "Today I want to teach you that essayists think about the tense that they are using as they craft their anecdotes, and they work to stay consistent in that tense throughout those stories. If we start a mini-story in past tense, we want to stay in past tense; we might, however, try telling an anecdote, either from our lives or from a book, in the present tense to make it feel closer to the reader. Then we stay in the present tense all the way through."
- "Today I want to teach you that essayists make sure to use proper punctuation when citing the title of a book or a short story in our writing. We can check our work against our editing checklist to make sure that we're using the right conventions: underlining or italics for book titles, and quotation marks around the title of a short story."
- "Let's celebrate with a gallery walk! Writers love to get feedback from other writers. One way to give feedback is to leave a Post-it with a specific compliment next to another writer's work."



## UNIT THREE

# Informational Writing

### *Building on Expository Structures to Write Lively, Voice-Filled Nonfiction Picture Books*

NOVEMBER

#### Overview

The Common Core State Standards highlight the importance of information (or explanatory) writing, describing it as writing that is designed to “examine a topic and convey information and ideas clearly.” At the highest levels, information writing and persuasive writing (as defined by the Common Core State Standards) blend, that is, many informational texts, especially some well-written adult texts, teach information while also aiming to persuade readers to think certain ideas. The Common Core State Standards, however, differentiate these two kinds of writing, suggesting that if the overall purpose of a text is to teach important information, then one idea will probably not dominate the entire text, nor will the driving structure of the writing be claim/evidence. Instead, in information writing, the driving structure is apt to be categories and subcategories. It’s also somewhat helpful to think of the features of argument versus informational writing—which are also described in the Common Core State Standards. Whether an argument is written in essays or in persuasive reviews or in editorials, these texts are generally marked by a thesis or opinion and evidence that is parceled into paragraphs. Informational writing is often marked by topics and subtopics that are signaled with headings and subheadings, with accompanying portals for information, including glossaries and text boxes or sidebars, and with diagrams, charts, graphs, and other visuals.

The fundamental thing to remember about informational writing is that the writer aims to teach readers about a topic. Just as we help students to think about information reading as a way of engaging in a course in which they are learning all about a



topic, we need to help them think about information writing as engaging in a course in which they teach all about a topic. An informational writer's purpose, then, is to help readers become informed on a topic that feels very important to the writer. That's the kind of writing your students will tackle in this unit. It's the kind of writing that kids will encounter in much of their nonfiction reading, such as the DK Readers, the Gail Gibbons and Seymour Simon books, the current event articles in *Time for Kids*, and their social studies and science texts. It's also the kind of writing for which it is easy to find lots of accessible mentor texts for kids.

Because informational texts are usually composites of smaller texts/chapters, often written in different text structures and genres, any unit on informational writing is bound to stand on the shoulders of units in narrative, opinion, and procedural writing as well as on units in nonfiction reading. This unit aims to help students harness all they know about all of these kinds of writing, using all of this in the service of creating texts that teach readers. The unit has the specific added goal of teaching youngsters about qualities of good writing as these pertain to information texts. Students learn that writing with focus is as important in information writing as it is in narrative writing. Students progress, with experience and instruction, from writing rather cursorily about very broad, generic topics toward being able to zoom in on more specific topics and therefore write with a greater density of relevant information. Eventually, experienced writers learn that they can focus not just on a smaller subject but on a particular angle on (or aspect of) that subject. For example, for young people writing a four- to five-page book, usually those writing on the topic of tigers will be working with less sophistication than those writing on the topic of the hunting patterns of the Bengal tiger. Students also learn to group their information into categories and, in time, into subcategories. With experience and instruction, students progress from grouping information into categories that appear to have been developed on the fly, based on the writers simply thinking, "Hmmm, what else do I have to say?" and then producing another chapter title, toward categories that are planned from the start and previewed early in the text, with the categories of information mirroring the logic of the text. If the writer's goal is to compare the hunting habits of the Bengal tiger at different times of day, the text might be organized by time. Then, too, the unit supports writers' growing ability to substantiate claims with information and to elaborate on and analyze that information. Students come to learn that when information writing is explanatory, the information that is included tends to be facts that explain a process, and when the informational text is anecdotal, then the information is apt to include examples that are sometimes in the form of anecdote or vignette.

In addition to teaching students to progress along this continuum, the unit channels students to work toward creating lively, voice-filled, engaging information books about topics of expertise. One of the rules of thumb in writing is that a writer can only make readers engaged in a topic if the writer is engaged in that topic. The unit, then, assumes that students are writing about self-chosen topics of great individual interest. As an alternative way to teach this unit, you might call on a previous content-area study. In classrooms that have brought to life units such as "Early American Leaders

Teach Lessons in Leadership: The Making of a Nation,” it might well be that students care and know about subtopics they’ve studied within that unit, and they can write with engagement and authority on a subtopic that falls under the purview of their social studies curriculum. However, if students are just embarking on a social studies unit and know only the barest outline about that topic, they would not be apt to write well on that topic. It is likely, then, that during this first nonfiction writing experience of the year, many students will write on topics of individual expertise.

Teachers wanting to learn more about the information source for this unit should refer to the Common Core State Standards and the samples collected within their appendix, to the TCRWP’s *Continuum for Assessing Information Writing*, and to the rich tradition of work in nonfiction writing done by leaders in the field of writing such as Don Murray, E. B. White, Roy Peter Clark, and William Zinsser.

## **Getting Ready: Imagining the Texts That Writers Will Create and Choosing Touchstone Texts That Align with Nonfiction Reading**

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It is crucial that you select captivating, well-written mentor texts to support your students in this work. Choose just a small number of texts that resemble those you hope your children will write in this unit, making the choice not by the topic of the texts but rather with an eye to the structures within which you hope your students will write. For instance, a book about the human body with clear sections, and varying formats, and writing that fifth graders could potentially see themselves in would be more supportive than one about pets that is very complex and far different from the kinds of writing your students will do. You will want to consider whether you will choose several mentor texts that are structured differently so as to expand students’ sense of options, or whether you want to channel students toward a particular structure so that you can provide more scaffolding by holding the class more closely together and ensuring that the text you write as an exemplar matches the ones they write. When selecting texts, you will likely find that some texts are narrative nonfiction texts. These might, for example, take readers through a timeline within the life of someone or something (people, animals, plants, rivers, wars, events). Some texts will be expository informational texts that teach all about a topic. Some will be nonfiction procedural texts that teach how to accomplish something, such as a scientific experiment. Some texts, of course, will be a composite of all of these and other kinds of informational writing.

You’ll need to decide which features you’ll want to highlight in your minilessons and to make sure the touchstone texts you select illustrate those features. For example, given that you’ll probably emphasize the importance of categorizing information, you’ll probably want to find model texts that have clear subcategories. You may want to emphasize that informational writers write in sections or chapters, and you may want to use the very concrete example of writing that begins with a table of contents and is divided into chapters to illustrate this concept—in which case you will need

books that contain a table of contents. Whether that is important to you or not, you will almost certainly want to show writers that information pertaining to one subtopic falls under one heading and information pertaining to another subtopic falls under a second heading, and so you will select mentor texts that have headings and subheadings, if not chapters and a table of contents. You may decide to highlight the fact that writers integrate facts with opinions and ideas, in which case you'll select mentor texts that illustrate this clearly. You may also search for exemplar texts that blend clear, straightforward informational writing with voice. If so, you'll look for books that engage the reader and sound as if the author is speaking straight to the reader, with sentences in which the author relates the information to something more personal embedded within the factual information.

During the concurrent nonfiction reading workshop unit, you will emphasize the differences between narrative and expository nonfiction. As such, you may choose mentor texts that contain some sections that sound more story-like (but are still informational) and some that are more course-like. For example, an informational book that deals with the life cycle of a butterfly may contain sections that sound more like a chronological narrative while still incorporating facts and other sections that sound like a lecture.

Once you've chosen an exemplar text or two, you're ready to begin. You'll want to provide a unit overview for your youngsters. This will be easy to do because in the reading workshop, your children will also be reading texts in which writers become teachers, laying out a course of study for readers. You might, therefore, say: "The authors that you are reading are functioning like your teachers. Well, you, too, can become a teacher, writing in such a way that you teach other people about the topics on which you are an expert."

## Assessing Informational Writing

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You will probably decide to launch the unit with an on-demand informational writing assessment. If you make this decision, we recommend using the same prompt and same conditions as other Reading and Writing Project teachers have used so that you will be in a position to analyze the writing your students produce under the same conditions, referring to the Continuum of Informational Writing ([www.readingandwritingproject.com](http://www.readingandwritingproject.com)). This means that on the day before the assessment, you say to your students, "Think of a topic that you've studied or know. Tomorrow, you will have an hour to write an informational (or All-About) text that teaches others interesting and important information and ideas about that topic. If you want to find and use information from a book or another outside source, you may bring that with you tomorrow. Please keep in mind that you'll have an hour to complete this." Then, the following day, provide them with sixty minutes, or one writing workshop, to show what they know about information writing.

Many teachers find that after students do this informational writing and they copy what students have done and note where the work falls along the continuum, it can

be helpful to give students a fast course on the topic and then allow them to spend a single day rewriting what they have written, from top to bottom, as this can allow teachers to assess what they know how to do without any instruction and what is easily within their grasp with just a brief number of reminders.

This on-demand writing will help you know where your students fall in a trajectory of writing development and help you set your sights on very clear next steps. It will also help students realize that informational writing is well within their grasp and not something that requires days and weeks of preparation. Most classrooms of students who have done the on-demand assessment have been pleasantly surprised by how much students bring into this unit of study, as well as the volume of writing students are able to produce in just one day's writing workshop. The work that students produce in the on-demand situation becomes the baseline, and you can increase expectations as the unit progresses.

## **Part One: Launching the Unit—Informational Writers Try On Topics and Then Revise Those Topics with an Eye Toward Greater Focus**

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Your first goal will be to inspire kids to regard information books as inspiring and compelling. You want to enter the unit with a class of youngsters who are dying to do this work as writers. Show students some of your favorite published nonfiction books, including those you have selected as mentors, and tell them what you love about those books—or let students browse and mark and talk about favorite pages and parts. Sometimes, kids will turn first to the illustrations or interesting text features. If so, you can explain that there is an art to writing books that entice a reader into learning a lot. Writers do sometimes include illustrations or text boxes or grabber-leads that are intended to capture the reader's attention and bring her awareness to the rest of the page. You can help your students, too, to go from those initially appealing sections to the rest of the page—to the compelling anecdotes and descriptions that are as interesting, if not as eye-catching, as the passages. The DK Readers and the Seymour Simon books in particular include a lot of vivid writing.

One way to recruit young writers to write with intensity is to share a vision with them right from the start of what will happen to their published pieces. Are you making a library of books about the solar system that will grace the shelves of the science classroom, be available for all young scientists, and be read to a younger grade or to the students the following year? Are you adding to the nonfiction books you have available for independent reading in your classroom, so that students can find expert books on training for soccer, the history of the woolly mammoth, or how coyotes are beginning to live in cities? Or you may even decide to make nonfiction books you will be sending to schools where students are eager for beautiful texts in English, such as small schools in Africa where classes are taught in English. One thing is for sure—kids knowing that their books will be handled and read by other readers (not just read aloud to other readers, but that individual, interested readers will turn the pages

themselves, lingering over the words and images) really increases the intensity, and thus their stamina and zeal for doing high-level work. You may have on hand a few terrific informational books that kids have made in prior years—if so, combine these with colleagues and share them with students to inspire them.

After teaching your writers that information books can be compelling, your next goal will be to teach writers that one of the first things an informational writer does is to select a topic and to focus that topic, narrowing it to the most interesting aspects. Your goal will not be to help writers come up with a topic for their writing—remember, always, that if you catch someone a fish, they eat for a day, but if you teach them to fish, they eat for a lifetime. Your goal, then, at the very start of the unit is to equip your students with a small repertoire of strategies that they can use again and again in life whenever they want to select a topic for informational writing. You'll probably want students to explore several possible topics (this makes it more likely that they settle upon a topic they have information about, and it gives you some time to cycle through the classroom, conferring with writers to edge them toward topics they seem especially knowledgeable of and invested in). Most teachers encourage writers to use their writer's notebooks as a place to record ideas for informational writing. Some teachers suggest it helps to think, "If I had to teach a course to the other kids in the class, what might I teach?" That question, for some children, can be a more supportive one than the more generic: "What am I an expert in?" Thinking "What would I teach this class?" leads a writer to consider not only his or her expertise but also the interests of a likely audience.

You could teach your students that some nonfiction writers try on ideas by writing potential back-of-the-book blurbs as a way to imagine how their books might go and why those books would interest readers. As writers collect ideas in their writer's notebooks, you'll want to make sure that rehearsal does not mean just writing a few words onto the page and calling it a day. You could suggest that writers record not just possible topics but possible subtopics within each topic. Writers could go further and think about subtopics within whatever subtopic interests them especially. Students will need conferences and small-group help to shift from writing about sharks to writing about sharks' eyes, and they might balk a bit at the idea of revising their topics. Keep in mind, however, that front-end revision during these early days will prove much more acceptable to students than later revisions that require them to discard many pages of work. Of course, some less proficient writers may have more success with broader topics—sharks, not shark eyes—and some more proficient writers may be able to handle a topic that is an idea, not just a subject (e.g., shark's eyes are very different than ours).

Some teachers suggest writers engage in a bit of research in order to try on possible topics, and there may be some value in ascertaining whether there are any readily available and accessible texts on a topic. But remind your fifth graders that, in general, writers don't often start from scratch. It would be much more of a challenge for someone to write a book about training for basketball if he or she doesn't play basketball or even watch it. For someone else, it would be a snap to get started with that—he or



she could imagine the whole book and could thus focus on learning to organize information and write well.

You might be tempted to encourage your fifth graders to choose topics from the nonfiction books they are reading. One note of caution—your fifth graders will be just starting the nonfiction reading unit of study. The goal of this first part of the nonfiction reading unit is to support fluency and reading with stamina. It is only later that the unit will support the reflection and note-taking work that students might use to support information writing. We strongly suggest that you steer your students toward topics of personal expertise so that they have a large body of knowledge on which to draw right away. These topics do not have to be personal in that they carry special meaning for your students; they just need to be topics that your students know a lot about. For example, students could write about a place they visit frequently on vacation, or they could write about their neighborhood in Brooklyn. Your students can do as much or as little research on topics as you are willing and able to support, but we do recommend that they have at least some information they can bring right away to the writing workshop.

Once your writers have spent a session or two trying on topics, you can teach either your whole class or (if your class is not experienced as writers) possibly just your more advanced writers to think about a focus, or perspective for the piece. Perspective does not necessarily mean that children will be writing opinions. But by grade five, the Common Core State Standards specify that information writers introduce a topic clearly and provide a general observation and focus. For example, the topic “Cheetahs are endangered” suggests that the writer has a perspective or an angle on the topic and that presumably the writer will forward this. Such a topic may seem at first to readers to be an opinion, making the text into opinion writing, but actually this is just the aspect of the topic that the writer has decided to highlight. To help your students make similar choices, each with his or her own individual topic, you’ll probably want to help writers ask questions such as “What do I want to say to my readers?” and “What do I feel is important for someone to know and feel after reading my piece?”

Probably by the share session at the end of the fourth day, you’ll want each child to have chosen his or her topic, with the stronger writers selecting more focused topics. The subject of “Soccer Goalie” or, better yet, “The Challenges of the Soccer Goalie” will make for better writing than “Soccer.” The less experienced writer, on the other hand, will have more success with the broader, more general topic, such as “Soccer.” Keep in mind that because the focus of this unit is on good writing and not on research, you’ll want to encourage students to choose subtopics or perspectives (as well as topics) in which they have expertise. Some of these topics emerge from nonfiction reading students have done, and sometimes students will want to choose different topics. In general, the more specific and focused your writers’ topics are, the more sophisticated their writing will be. Just as choosing a focused, zoomed-in small moment enables a personal narrative writer to write with greater specificity and elaboration, choosing a focused topic enables an information writer to do the same.



Once writers have chosen a topic, you can move them toward planning the parts or categories for their topic. Teach your writers some of the different ways that writers plan for how their information texts will go. One way writers plan is to think of a table of contents for their work, determining the chapters that they could put in their book. Writers also might use boxes and bullets to plan, with their boxes containing topics and subtopics rather than claims (as in essay writing). If you have opportunities to do some small-group work to support this, writers will certainly profit from some close-in feedback. You can help writers understand that when breaking a topic into parts, the parts need to cover the entire topic. One can't write a book on the United States and write just about four randomly selected states—but one could write about Eastern, Southern, Western, and Central United States. If that list of component parts of the United States included New York City in it, that would be odd, since usually component parts must be of equal weight and parallel. It is helpful to teach students ways that information pieces are typically divided. For example, information writers often use parts, kinds, or times. If some of your students struggle to think of categories or subtopics, you could teach them in a small group that writers can always go back and revise their topics, perhaps making them broader, that is to say, perhaps their original topic choice is really a subtopic under a broader category about which they have more to say. Additionally, you'll want to coach writers into creating categories that feel parallel in weight.

## **Part Two: Writers Gather a Variety of Information to Support Their Nonfiction Books**

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Just as your writers gathered a variety of information in their notebooks to support their essay claims, they will gather a variety of information to support their information books. After a few days of collecting their ideas in notebooks, you will want to shift your writers into gathering the information that will fill up the pages of their books. First, you will need to teach that writers gather information for their books and make decisions about how much and what kind of research they will need to conduct.

You will want to remind your young writers of the importance of gathering a variety of information and information that comes from more than one source. This is a good time to teach them to bring forward all they know from the nonfiction reading units about growing ideas through writing about a topic. You can teach your students different ways to collect in their notebooks: sometimes they might make bullet points of facts; sometimes they might write long, growing some ideas about the facts they are collecting; and they also might keep a running list of difficult vocabulary words for a glossary. They might make summaries of what they are reading and organize those summaries in different ways depending on what they are reading. If you have been following the content-area units of study, your students will have a repertoire of strategies on which they can draw to use note-taking as a way to grow their thinking about a topic. Because the information will need to be sorted into categories and

subcategories, you may want the research to be collected in folders, with one folder for each subtopic. In this case, encourage children to collect notes on single sheets of paper, stored in the appropriate folder. Help children avoid collecting a hodgepodge of disparate information stuck together into gigantic blobs.

You will need to decide whether you want part of this unit to include students doing short, focused, on-the-run research in which they locate and use print and online sources to supplement the information they already have. This probably should not become a unit where research overwhelms everything else, with students spending the majority of their time collecting rather than *writing*. Still, you will no doubt encourage writers to use sources to verify and extend their known information. For example, a writer creating an information book titled *Great Artists of the Harlem Renaissance* might not know the exact years in which some artists were born and might feel that information would be useful. She could conduct an Internet search looking for this specific information. Writers should also be encouraged to use more than one source to support their writing. The amount of research your writers do will of course be dependent on the amount you feel able to support. A word here on tracking and citing sources. In the following unit on research-based argument essays, you will teach your students more specifically how to carefully track sources as they research and later cite them as they draft and revise. But of course it is imperative that by fifth grade students learn to credit sources and avoid plagiarism. If you are teaching this unit in such a way that your students are doing a fair amount of research, you will likely want to teach them right away that information writers keep a list of books and other sources they use as they research so they can later incorporate these sources into their draft.

### **Part Three: Informational Writers Draft the Pages of Books, Starting with Sections They Are Most Eager to Write**

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At this point in the unit, your students will have a sense of the categories, or subtopics, they'll be covering in their information book, and along the way they will have been gathering information in their notebooks. You can teach your writers that one way to rehearse for drafting is to teach all they know about their topic to a partner, taking care to deliver the information in subsections. Your writers will be accustomed to bringing each other information from the nonfiction reading units. In this session, a possible mid-workshop teaching point is to teach that information writing is intended for a specific purpose and audience, as the Common Core State Standards for informational writing suggest, and that the purpose of this kind of writing is often to teach others about a topic. Teach your writers to note areas where their information seems weak and to make a plan to shore up weak areas by finding out more about that particular subtopic. Focus your coaching during this session on students having adequate information for each subtopic, as this will be key when you are later teaching your students to elaborate well. Remind your students, perhaps in a

mid-workshop teaching point or a share, that writers revise during all stages of the writing process, and as they collect information in categories, they might also revise their subtopics. If they find they have too much information for one subtopic, they might consider breaking it into two. Conversely, if they don't have enough information for a subtopic, they will need to either collect more information or perhaps eliminate the subtopic altogether.

After collecting information for a few days, your students will most likely be more than ready to put together the pieces of their essays and draft long and strong. You can teach your writers that as they begin planning for their drafts, it is important they look carefully at the texts that serve as mentors for this unit. You may highlight the texts that include a table of contents that contains different chapters, each of which takes up a different aspect of the topic.

In one session, you could teach that information writers often start with the pages they are most fired-up about. You could teach your students different ways to approach drafting these initial pages. Teach your fifth graders that when information writers draft, they keep in mind that they are writing in such a way to set readers up to be experts. Then teach that information writers often draft one subsection at a time, keeping in mind everything they want to teach the reader about that particular subtopic. If you feel your writers have a solid understanding of nonfiction text structures, remind them to draw on all they know about different ways that nonfiction texts can be structured as they draft, choosing the structure that will best support the information they are trying to convey. In some cases, a compare/contrast structure may best support the information; in others, boxes and bullets may be useful; and in others, a narrative structure may work best. Nonfiction writers often use a variety of structures within subsections, especially as texts become more complicated.

As an alternative, either in a minilesson or in a small group for writers who struggle with drafting, you could teach your writers that one possible way students could draft is by starting with more visual texts (e.g., labeled diagrams with captions).

In the following session (or tucked into Session I if your writers are more experienced), teach your writers that information writers organize the information they have collected within each subsection in a way that best teaches the reader. Often an effective way to organize information is to move from the general to the specific, giving first big ideas that the reader needs to know about the topic and then moving to the smaller details, like interesting facts. This is an excellent time to draw on partnerships. Partners can work together to share sections of text and to ask each other, "Did I answer all of your questions as a reader? Did I set you up to be an expert in this topic? Did I tell you enough in the beginning so that you could understand all of the parts at the end? Did you have any questions about specific ideas, parts, or even words after reading the whole section?" You may want to collect other questions or prompts partners can use to support each other and compile them on a chart with the questions listed here.

During this stage of the writing process, it is often tempting to teach your students to draft the entire book from start to finish, starting with the introduction. We encourage

you to resist this temptation! One reason is that the introduction and concluding sections of an information piece have a different format and purpose than the body sections. Your students will need you to teach right away into the format of the body sections, the parts of the piece that have a common structure and will make up the bulk of the writing. Also, drafting an introduction before writing the sections of a book can limit the writer to stick closely to the shores of what he or she originally imagined in the introduction, which can lead to few revisions and potentially formulaic writing. It is important to leave room for your writers to make huge revisions to their original plans as they draft.

In another drafting session, you can teach your writers to make a plan for the text features that will support each page, such as illustrations, diagrams, charts, and sidebar definitions. You'll want to keep an eye on volume during this session, reminding your writers to continue drafting body text along with planning text features and to incorporate all they know about quality expository writing into their drafts. You'll want to refer to any of the charts you used during the essay unit that might support qualities of good information writing, for example, charts that support elaboration prompts, transition words, or kinds of evidence to include in essays. If your students conducted research earlier and tracked sources they used, you can teach them here simple ways to cite sources as they draft. Note that in fifth grade, it is not required that their text be fully annotated. You can teach them stems to use to connect pieces of information with sources, such as: "According to . . ." or "In the book . . . by . . . , it says . . ." or "The author . . . teaches us that. . . ."

## **Part Four: Informational Writers Study Mentor Authors and Revise in Predictable Ways**

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Plan to devote ample time to the revision portion of this unit. As in any unit of study, some, if not all, of your students will still be drafting as you begin your revision lessons. Writers can incorporate the revision strategies you teach right away into their drafts, remembering that writers continually revise; they don't wait until "revision week" to use all they are learning about information writing to re-see and rework what they have already written. There are many powerful revision moves that information writers can make that fall into predictable categories. Most of the powerful revision strategies for information writing fall into the categories of structure, elaboration, and craft. We encourage you to study the *Continuum for Assessing Information Writing*, where expectations for each of these categories are clearly outlined.

Remind your students that good writing does not happen in isolation. We highly recommend that you and your students call once again on your study of mentor texts. The use of mentor texts will be particularly helpful when your writers are thinking of ways to elaborate each section with a variety of evidence and ways to support each section with text features, such as charts and diagrams. For a list of leveled information books to use as mentor texts, visit our website, [www.readingandwritingproject.com](http://www.readingandwritingproject.com),

and click on the “resources” tab at the top of the page. We also recommend that you use a demonstration text of your own information writing that you revise in mini-lessons and use when conferring with your writers. You can also use other students’ information writing as mentor texts. You and your students can study the information writing included in the *Continuum for Assessing Information Writing* as well as the information pieces written by students that are posted on our website.

You might begin your revision work by teaching into *elaboration* strategies for information writing. It can be helpful during this time to angle your teaching and coaching toward teaching them the muscles that information writers need to develop—explanatory writing, descriptive writing, idea-based writing, and anecdote writing. In one session, you might teach your writers to study mentor texts, taking note of the variety of information that information writers use to teach readers about subtopics. Teach your writers to include explanations of important ideas, using explanatory language and giving examples. Your writers can also include direct quotations from books or from people regarded as experts. You could create a chart with your students, highlighting types of details spotlighted in the Common Core State Standards, such as *facts*, *definitions*, *concrete details*, *quotes*, or *examples* related to the topic. In another session, you might teach your writers that information writers think about stories or anecdotes that help to explain or teach about a subtopic. For example, a student with the topic of “Great Artists of the Harlem Renaissance” might decide to include a story about Langston Hughes’ childhood as part of a subcategory on the poet. During these sessions, you can focus your conferring on helping writers to synthesize and integrate information from a variety of sources (an easier task if your writers collected adequate information earlier in the unit).

In another session, you could teach your writers to include not only information but some of their thinking about the information. The Common Core State Standards specify that information writers should not only select and organize content but also *analyze* it. Writers can say more about their topic by including their own observations and ideas about what they are teaching. Writers could return to their notebooks to grow ideas, once again drawing on thought prompts such as “This is important because . . .” and “This is connected to . . .” and then could think about where to add this thinking to their drafts. For example, after writing a fact about cheetahs, such as “Cheetahs are endangered for several main reasons: they are losing their food sources, they are being hunted too much, they are losing their habitat, and their babies die easily.” The writer could then go on to offer some opinions or commentary about this, such as “Two of those reasons are caused by humans, hunting and losing their habitat. People should stop hunting cheetahs, and we should be careful to protect their habitats so they can survive.”

The Common Core State Standards highlight the importance of using domain-specific language, in other words, vocabulary and terms specific to the topic. Teach writers to be on the lookout for places to use and define vocabulary words that are connected to the topic that might be hard for readers to understand. The Common Core State Standards state that, by grade four and beyond, information writers



should use “precise language and domain-specific vocabulary to inform about or explain the topic.” There are several different ways that information writers teach vocabulary to their readers. The most supportive way to teach a vocabulary word (and often information writers choose this method for very difficult technical words) is to write the word in bold and to state its definition outside of the text. Often this is done in the margin of the page on which the word appears. Another way information writers can teach vocabulary is to include the word and its definition as part of the text. For example, a writer might say: “The body of an octopus, called the mantle, helps it to breathe and swim.” A less supportive way to teach vocabulary is to include words in the text without definitions, leading readers to use context clues, for example, “The mantle of the octopus is connected to all eight of its legs and helps it to breathe and swim.”

Information writers are well served to keep in mind the old adage that “a picture is worth a thousand words.” The Common Core State Standards remind us that writers don’t just teach information with text; they also teach information through *formatting* (e.g., headings), *illustrations*, and *multimedia*. These tools help readers to understand even more powerfully the information that the writer is teaching. You can support your students in this work by studying mentor texts with them to analyze how text features help us to teach additional information to our audience, such as how we teach important vocabulary through text boxes or glossaries, how we use annotated diagrams to clarify explanations, and how we may think across the headings and sub-headings or other text features on our pages to refine the journey we are taking our readers on. You may offer the opportunity for students to include interactive elements, such as “lift the flap” features or fold-out maps and diagrams, or exploded details and charts. These often add compelling visual features to informational texts—and our kids need to improve their ability to synthesize and interpret these visual elements. Creating them as writers will only help them as readers. Remind your writers to also cite sources for visual elements they include, right in the text when information from a particular text or author helped them to create a text feature.

You can also teach your information writers to revise with the lens of *structure*. In one session, you could teach that information writers make sure they have grouped information into categories, thinking about whether the information included in each section fits with the subtopic. You might also tuck into this session the reminder that information writers think about the order of information within each category, thinking through whether they have organized the information in a way that best conveys the information to the reader. Although you most likely taught this concept during the drafting stage, you will want to support your writers in the organization of their information within each section during your one-on-one coaching.

As part of this session, you could teach your writers that each section of an information text tends to have an introduction that previews for the readers what they are going to learn about in that section. The Common Core State Standards refer to this work as “orienting the reader.” For example, a section titled “The Cheetah’s Habitat” might start by saying, “There are many factors that are causing the cheetah’s habitat



to become smaller.” This introduction to the section tells readers they will be learning about not just the cheetah’s habitat but also ways that it is being destroyed.

The Common Core State Standards lay out the importance of including introductory and concluding sections that are connected to the main topic, that reflect the most important information and ideas from the piece. Teach your writers to revise the introductory sections to their books, asking questions such as “What do I want to teach readers at the beginning of my book? How can I draw in the reader right from the start? How can I give the reader an overview, an introduction, to my topic? Does my beginning set up the reader to become an expert in this topic?”

Teach your writers strategies for revising their conclusions as well. A conclusion should not only sum up the important information but also leave readers with some big ideas. Your fifth graders will have had plenty of experience using information in order to persuade. You could teach your students to use those same muscles here to compose a concluding section that is meant to convince the world of something they strongly believe about the topic. Teach your writers that a powerful kind of concluding section in an information book is structured like an essay, with a thesis and some examples. For example, a student writing about monarch butterflies might write a concluding section with a thesis-like statement such as “Monarch butterflies are very important to plants.” Then the writer could go on to give examples of different types of plants that monarch butterflies help to pollinate. Another writer, writing about great white sharks, might begin with a thesis that is a call to action to readers, such as “Many kinds of sharks are endangered, and none more so than the great white. It is our responsibility to protect this amazing animal.”

Plan to teach your students craft moves that information writers make. Teach them to use transition words to move from detail to detail and to connect subtopics to the main topic. The Common Core State Standards suggest particular transition words at each grade level that will be excellent additions to your transition words strategy charts. Teach students to use transition words such as *another*, *for example*, *also*, *because*; as they become more sophisticated in their writing, teach them to use transitions such as *in contrast*, *especially*, *furthermore*, and *moreover*. Additionally, depending on the skill level of your students, you can teach them some strategies to write with greater description and verve. You can teach them to embed imagery, anecdotes, and/or small scenes to paint a picture in the reader’s mind.

You’ll want to make sure you have strong writing partnerships going as students draft and revise. In addition to holding each other accountable to the strategies you’ll be teaching, partners can support each other by playing the parts of students and teachers, taking turns teaching each other about their topic section by section and asking questions when the information isn’t clear or fully developed. Particularly because the topics will be ones of personal expertise, writers may tend to gloss over important background information. Partners can help each other to identify places that need more support and clarification. These places might include discussions of important concepts or places where difficult vocabulary is used. You’ll certainly want to create a strategy chart to support this partner work.

## Part Five: Editing, Publishing, and Celebrating

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In teaching editing, tell children that their texts are going to teach important information to their readers and thus need to be clear and accurate. How can the reader learn about the topic if the writer's words are misspelled? In editing nonfiction books, teach children that the resources they used to get their information are great sources for correcting spelling of content-specific vocabulary. Remind them to bring forward all they know about conventions to this genre. In addition, you might also teach children another use of commas that shows up a lot in nonfiction—offsetting definitions of words that are defined in context. Fifth graders, according to the Common Core State Standards for language, should be able not only to use commas in the ways outlined in the fourth-grade unit but also to offset items in a series and to offset introductory information in a sentence, both of which are language structures often used in information writing. Particularly if you have supported your fifth graders' use of outside sources, teach them to use quotation marks accurately and to italicize or underline titles. Informational writing also provides a perfect opportunity to remind your writers about when and where to use paragraphs.

Then get ready to publish! You and your students should be tremendously proud of the independence and effort they have shown and of the breadth of their expertise and their prowess as writers. Celebrate these achievements by giving your writers a chance to teach others what they have learned. You might do this by hosting a grade-wide celebration or by sharing with another grade or with parents. You might encourage your writers to present their work orally. You might teach them to make presentation boards and captions and to practice presenting their work. Or you might encourage them to share visually. You could create a gallery of the finished books and invite others to visit. The Common Core State Standards recommend using technology tools as part of the publishing process. In tech-savvy classrooms, you might suggest that your writers publish electronically, perhaps in the form of PowerPoint or even as a blog or wiki. Sites such as [blogspot.com](http://blogspot.com) and [pbworks.com](http://pbworks.com) are free hosting platforms that will also serve to teach your students some online formatting skills. You can set your students' permissions on these sites to "private" to protect their privacy.

### Additional Resources

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Teachers, before embarking on this unit and deciding on the trajectory you will follow, you will need to assess your students and to study what it is they need to know. You can use an on-demand writing assessment to better understand your students' level of competency with information writing. Level 8 of the continuum is aligned to the fifth-grade expectations according to the Common Core State Standards. Of course, your assessment will be ongoing, not just at the start of this unit but at many points along the way, and you will use what you learn through studying your students' work to inform how you progress through the work outlined in the unit. The teaching

points offered here are but one suggested way that the unit could go. The ultimate pathway will be based on observations you make of your students and assessments of their work. Here are some further insights about expectations during each part of this unit and how to plan to meet the needs of your individual learners.

In Part One of the unit, the goal is for students to generate a great number of note-book entries, first trying out topics of individual expertise and then eventually choosing a seed idea and rehearsing for a draft. Study your students' writing for evidence of strategy use and for volume. The goal is that students write productively and move from entry to entry with independence and use a variety of strategies, such as writing possible back-of-the-book blurbs or making lists of possible chapters for their books. You may have some writers who are reluctant to generate more than one or two possible topics. Support these students in reaching further for possible topic choices. If your students are slow to generate ideas, you may want to spend more time teaching strategies for choosing topics of expertise, in either small-group or whole-class sessions. If students are not writing with fluency and volume, you may decide to use a timer and to call out voiceovers, such as "By now, your hand should be flying down the page. . . . By now you should have written half a page." You may need to gather a small group to shepherd them into writing more quickly and do some diagnostic work to understand what is slowing them down. Then you will turn your teaching toward helping your writers to choose a seed idea for their books. It is important that they have a variety of topics from which to choose. If students struggle to choose a topic, they may need one-on-one coaching during this time.

In the second part of the unit, you will be supporting students as they collect research and information to support their information books. In addition to choosing and possibly further focusing a topic, it is crucial at this point that your students have a strong sense of the subcategories that will fill the pages of their books. Toward the end of this part, your students should have not only a high volume of information but also a variety of information such as quotes, anecdotes, and statistics to support each subcategory. If your students' information seems weak, you may need to spend more time in this part teaching into note-taking and research before moving on to drafting.

In the third part of the unit, your students will be drafting their information books and may need a different level of support than what is outlined in this unit, depending on their competence with expository writing. If your students have more or less an internalized sense of how expository writing "goes," your progression through the unit will likely closely parallel what is outlined in the teaching points below. It is likely that your fifth graders will feel comfortable drafting fairly quickly and cycling back and forth between drafting and revising. Some of your students may benefit from additional support in small groups, for which you can call on teaching from other expository units. One such unit you could draw from is the fourth-grade personal and persuasive essay unit, which has a supportive progression through drafting.

The way you progress through the fourth part of this unit will very much depend on what you observe in your students' drafts. We recommend that you once again call on the Continuum for Information Writing as a tool with which to study drafts. Study

the work through the lenses of structure, elaboration, and craft, deciding what are the most crucial lessons within each of those categories to teach right away. During all parts of the unit, and particularly this one, you will want to ensure that your teaching supports students' independence. Your teaching will support revision, but your writers may move from drafting sections to revision and back to drafting. Study your students as they work for evidence that they are using a repertoire of strategies and that they are making choices about what to work on next.

As you head into the final part of this unit, take note of how you can support your students in being effective editors for themselves. Your students will likely be using high-level vocabulary, and some may need additional spelling support, perhaps in small groups. Notice common punctuation errors and teach into these, possibly through mid-workshop teaching points or minilessons as needed.

## One Possible Sequence of Teaching Points

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### **Part One: Launching the Unit—Informational Writers Try on Topics and Then Revise Those Topics with an Eye toward Greater Focus**

- “Today I want to teach you that writers of information books study published writing, imagining the books they will create and paying close attention to ways that published authors entice readers to learn about a topic.”
- “Today I want to teach you that information writers grow potential topic ideas in their notebooks, thinking, ‘If I had to teach a course to the other kids in the class, what would I teach?’”
- “Today I want to teach you that some information writers write potential back-of-the-book blurbs, imagining how their books might go and why those books would interest readers.”
- “Today I want to teach you that information writers try on possible topics, choosing one that they feel they could teach really well.”
- “Today I want to teach you that information writers make a plan for how their books could go. One way they do this is by creating a table of contents for their work, determining the chapters that could go in their books.”

### **Part Two: Writers Gather a Variety of Information to Support Their Nonfiction Books**

- “Today I want to teach you that information writers gather the information that will fill up the pages of their books. Along the way, they make decisions about

how much and what kind of research to conduct. They collect these ideas in notebooks, taking care to collect a variety of information and information from more than one source.”

- “Today I want to teach you that information writers record not just facts but ideas. They can use thought prompts to say more about pieces of information that they collect.”

### **Part Three: Informational Writers Draft the Pages of Books, Starting with Sections They Are Most Eager to Write**

- “Today I want to teach you that one way information writers rehearse for drafting is to teach all they know about their topic to a partner. They take note of places where they need to collect more information and make a plan to find out more about that particular subtopic.”
- “Today I want to teach you that information writers often start by drafting the pages they are most fired up to write. As they draft, they keep in mind that they are setting up their readers to be experts.”
- “Today I want to teach you that information writers organize the information they have collected within each subsection in a way that best teaches the reader. One way writers do this is by saying big or general ideas that the reader needs to know about the subtopic first, before getting to the smaller details.”
- “Today I want to teach you that information writers make a plan for the text features that will support each page, such as illustrations, diagrams, charts, and sidebar definitions.”

### **Part Four: Informational Writers Study Mentor Authors and Revise in Predictable Ways**

- “Information writers study mentor texts, taking note of all of the different kinds of information that writers use to teach readers about subtopics. Information writers often include explanations of important ideas, quotes from experts, facts, definitions, and other examples related to the subtopic.”
- “Today I want to teach you that information writers include not only information but some of their own thinking about the information. Information writers might return to their notebooks to grow ideas, drawing on thought prompts such as ‘This is important because . . .’ and ‘This is connected to . . .’ in order to say more.”

- “Today I want to teach you that information writers stay on the lookout for places where they might need to define vocabulary words that are connected to the topic that might be hard for readers to understand. Writers keep in mind common ways that information writers teach important words and decide which way will be best for each word.”
- “Today I want to teach you that information writers don’t just teach information with words; they teach information with illustrations, charts, diagrams, and other tools that might help the reader to understand. Writers can study mentor texts to get tips on how to create and revise these text features.”
- “Today I want to teach you that information writers zoom in to study the structure of each subsection. They make sure the information is in the right section, that is, that each detail fits with the subtopic. Writers also zoom in on paragraphs within each subsection, thinking about whether the information in each paragraph fits together. Another way that writers study the structure of each subsection is to make sure they start with a sentence or two that tell the readers what they will be learning about.”
- “Today I want to teach you that writers revise the introduction of their information books, thinking about how they can set their readers up to be experts in the topic and how they can draw readers in right from the start.”
- “Today I want to teach you that information writers revise their concluding section, taking care to sum up the important information and also leave readers with some big ideas. A powerful kind of concluding section in an information book is structured like an essay, with a thesis and some examples.”
- “Today I want to teach you that information writers use transition words to move from detail to detail and to connect subtopics to the main topic.”

## **Part Five: Editing, Publishing, and Celebrating**

- “Today I want to teach you that information writers edit carefully, taking care to make sure spelling and punctuation are accurate so that readers can best learn the information. Writers might use published resources to make sure vocabulary words are spelled correctly.”
- “Today I want to teach you that information writers celebrate all of the hard work they have done by getting ready to share the books they have created with others.”





## UNIT FOUR

# Research-Based Argument Essays

## DECEMBER

We tweet opinions as we have them, update Facebook statuses, and respond to those of our “friends.” We “share” news articles with countless, often faceless, others. And we do all this not at a solitary desk but in line at the checkout counter, during lunch in a crowded deli, or while getting a haircut. Never before has literacy become so intertwined with daily life; never has publishing been so frightfully simple and far-reaching. It is clear that our children will forge radically different literate communities than the ones we, their teachers, grew up into.

This raises important questions for educators about the non-negotiable nature of certain literacy skills. Today it is more crucial than ever that readers be more than passive receptacles and writers be more than echoers of the line of the day. Because, even as various vehicles of publication rapidly revolutionize, the processes for developing clear, independent opinions remain unchanged. Readers still need to read multiple texts, train our eyes to unearth biases, talk back to the text; writers still need to develop an original thought and frame, revise, and edit this—the classic skills required to produce the research essayists are more crucial to teach today than ever before, not because they are featured on the Common Core State Standards or high-stakes tests but because they are necessary life skills for the upcoming iPhone/Android-clutching generation. More than ever before, we need to teach children to think and write with deliberation so that literacy means more than the fleeting wit of a Facebook status, so that children forge the opinions that will shape their lives’ actions based on thoughtfully researched evidence.

In this unit, you’ll teach children the writing skills of a researcher and an essayist. Specifically, you’ll teach them to retrieve informed opinions from within their reading and research on a topic and to craft these opinions into argument essays. To do this

you'll teach them to stake a claim, to provide logically ordered reasons in its defense, and also to dismember possible counterclaims. You'll want to align this work with the December Nonfiction Reading Unit, that is, you'll want to tap into reading workshop time for children to do the extensive reading and researching of topics that will provide the intellectual fodder for the argument essays developed during the writing workshop.

## Assessment

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You may want to give your students a performance assessment beforehand, so that you can hone your instruction to what they already know how to do and to what they'll need extra practice with. TCRWP has available a performance assessment that provides students with a few texts on the same subject and asks them to gather and evaluate information and then draft a persuasive essay staking a claim and supporting it with evidence from the texts. The first thing you'll want to look for is your kids' ability to write the bare-bones of essays, as in writing with a thesis and evidence in logical supporting paragraphs. If they struggle with the structure of essays, you'll probably want to forgo this unit and turn instead to the personal essay unit, which is described in our sixth-grade curricular calendars. You may also want to tease out, if students have difficulty with the task, whether their difficulty lies in the level of the nonfiction texts and their reading skills or in their writing skills. Keep an eye on what evidence your students cite. If you notice that they only cite evidence from the easier texts, you'll know that they struggle to read grade-level nonfiction texts. If your students show evidence of prior instruction with essays but they struggle to accurately and persuasively reference textual research, that's to be expected. You should see measurable improvement after this unit.

## Overview

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This month, in reading workshop, readers are working in small research groups during reading workshop, gathering, and evaluating resources on high-interest topics from dolphins to black holes to electric cars. It is a good idea to synchronize the first part of this unit with the first part of Unit Four of reading workshop so that children bring this research to their writing, through notes.

Part One is relatively quick and straightforward. You'll start by teaching children how to make notes on whatever they've been reading during reading workshop. As children start "authoring" notes, they will learn that a researcher's notes are personalized, that they are tools for future thinking/writing projects. By the time they pick up a second or third book on the same topic from their text sets during the reading workshop, you will move them into Part Two, which teaches more cross-textual ways of authoring notes. In this part, children's notes will compare and contrast the many faces of a topic and the different perspectives of various authors about this topic, and they will come to a better understanding of various possible stances or arguments associated with this topic. In

Part Three, you'll stop referring to your students as "researchers," instead, referring to the work of this part and beyond by addressing them as "essayists." In Part Three, you'll teach children how to set up the foundation of an argument essay—drafting a thesis statement drafting evidence to support the claim and the various strategies to shoot down a counterclaim. Part Four deals with revision and craft strategies that your essayists will use to polish their essays and ready them for publication. This month's work might be celebrated by publishing student essays on a class's blog or website—where peers and perhaps a monitored external audience may respond to these essays.

The Common Core State Standards require fifth graders to "conduct short research projects that use several sources to build knowledge through investigation of different aspects of a topic," a standard that this unit fulfills in a rather exemplary way. It also allows children to "recall relevant information . . . from print; summarize or paraphrase information in notes and finished work, and provide a list of sources." Finally, if you celebrate the unit by making children upload essays on a blog or website, you will meet yet another Common Core standard, one that requires that children "with some guidance and support from adults, use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing as well as to interact and collaborate with others; demonstrate sufficient command of keyboarding skills to type a minimum of two pages in a single sitting."

## Part One: Researchers Collect Information and Make Notes

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Before we expect children to write anything of value, it is important to teach them, first, to collect the words and ideas that later might be teased and torn apart, stretched, made bigger, and evidenced, words and ideas they can add nuance to and generate anecdotes for. The writing process begins with collecting ideas. This is as true for research writing as it is for poetry or fairy tales.

To help your children collect material for their research essays, you'll want to align this part's teaching closely with Part One of the December unit in reading workshop. During reading time, children are beginning their first book from a text set on a specific nonfiction topic with titles like *Arctic Animals*, *Ancient Egypt*, *Penguins*, or *Food Chains*. This reading from a text set—a range of different books on one topic—is fertile ground for collection of ideas on this topic. Of course, this also means that writers' topic choices will be limited by whatever they're reading about during reading workshop time—scaffolded teaching often imposes necessary restraints on free choice—but as you'll see later, *within* each topic, writers will have the chance to narrow down and choose a subtopic to angle independent opinions on. And of course, once your writers go through the structured work of this unit, they will have acquired enough command of argument essays for them to research and argue about anything they like.

To collect materials that will go on to inform their argument essays, you'll want to teach children to take notes like a researcher would. "We don't just scribble-scrabble an odd fact or two; we make sure our notes are careful and precise because they will

be an important reference for later writing,” you’ll teach, in order to stress at the very outset that these notes are not an end in themselves but critical tools for future use.

Like all tools, these notes will need to be customized by their user. One child might decide to take notes using simple boxes and bullets on small note cards, while another reader might make elaborate sketch-notes on large loose sheets. One reader might unpeel Post-its from texts he has read and stick them into a notebook to jot longer notes off each Post-it while another makes timelines and T-charts. Or, preferably, children will be doing all of these things at different times! Your teaching in this part needs to remind writers of their repertoire of note-taking strategies (drawing on the Content-Area Curricular Calendar) in ways that allow them to choose which strategy makes the most sense to use for a particular text and kind of information. During this first part in the unit, each day, in writing workshop, readers will begin by revisiting the books they read during reading workshop to take writers’ notes off of these. Expect writers to generate a volume of notes, using a variety of note-taking strategies. Expect also that children’s notes will not only capture the salient points of this topic but also generate thoughts and reactions about this topic.

To begin teaching various note-taking strategies (if you have not already taught these), you might start children off on the simple boxes-and-bullets format. You might teach them to mentally or, if resources allow this, physically mark up a text, selecting various topic sentences to “box” and then underlining and numbering the sentences (or clauses) that serve as bullets for each box. Teach students to make boxes and bullets within single paragraphs and also within larger (multiparagraph) swaths of text. You’ll also want to remind readers that boxes and bullets are effective ways to take notes off of expository texts, but when it comes to notes on narrative nonfiction, they’ll want to switch to timelines. You’ll want to revisit teaching points on how to make sketch-notes, timelines, and ranked lists—these are explained in detail in the September/October unit of the Content-Area Curricular Calendar. You might also choose to teach some graphic organizers that are particularly suited to specific kinds of note-taking. For example, a T-chart is effective for comparing and contrasting items on a parallel list separated by the line of the T. Similarly, the pros and cons of something might also be listed on a T-chart. Also, where there are more than two categories to compare and contrast, teach children to draw more columns until they have a table—and teach them how to organize columns and rows so that all the information they record might be summarized, visually appraised, and efficiently accessed later.

It is important to teach children to paraphrase during the note-taking process. Urge them to summarize ideas from the text to record and discourage the practice of lifting lengthy portions of texts to copy verbatim. “Notes are short, quick, efficient,” you’ll want to teach. “Note-taking should free us to see more in texts and pick the most important or interesting parts, not bog us down with copying long parts of the text—who wants to read that when we can just read the text itself? Wherever you lift a thought from a text, write it out in your own words if you can and keep it short.”

You certainly won’t want to wait long before stressing that research notes do not merely record information from books, that a researcher’s note-making process

incorporates *actively responding* to all this information that we're recording. For example, as they jot boxes and bullets, students may also add asterisks to a bullet that outranks the others in importance or circle a bullet that feels controversial and jot further thoughts on why it is so. You might say, "When we read, we have questions, we react to facts, we compare what we're reading now with something else we've read before; in reading workshop, we've been marking those spots with Post-its. A researcher values these Post-its because these can be used as trail-starters for deeper thinking." You might demonstrate how a response Post-it might be stretched by unpeeling a sample Post-it jotted by a student or by you (in preparation for this demonstration) and share it aloud with your students. "While reading about the Venus's-flytrap, I stuck a Post-it next to this part in my book that says this plant is becoming endangered in the wild because of pollution, destruction of its habitat, and excessive picking. On my Post-it, I wrote, 'The Flytrap needs help.'" I later unpeeled this Post-it and stuck it on a chart paper as I demonstrated how I might elaborate this briefly captured thought. I then wrote out: "The Venus's-flytrap needs our help. Because it is carnivorous, I imagined that it was tough. Now, I'm thinking, it is endangered like other tough-sounding animals that humans have endangered like the Bengal tiger, the snow leopard, the white shark." Calling students' attention to what I had done, I said, "See how my Post-its help me make notes that respond to what I'm reading?"

Make certain that children see note-taking as a flexible process. Teach them to experiment with various ways of recording ideas. For example, they can take two note-taking strategies such as sketch-notes and timelines and merge them into sketching a timeline, or in place of boxes and bullets, they can make small idea clusters, with the "box" in the center and the bullets sticking out like spokes from within this. Wherever you see a child creating notes that record and respond to information in new and creative ways, share these with the rest of the class, asking the author of these notes to explain.

As children's notes on a topic grow, ask them to hold these together in a folder or notebook. Clarify, at this stage, that these folders will play a crucial part later in the unit, that students ought to save all their notes and Post-its in them, that they must make folder entries provocative and original, responding to the details about their topic that they're encountering in the various texts.

## Part Two: While Making Notes, Researchers Examine the Many Sides of a Topic

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As children become more and more adept at taking notes, you'll want to teach them different ways of looking at texts. So far, children's notes have merely recorded all that a text has explicitly stated—and jotted responses or thoughts inspired from such direct recordings. There are ways for children to look beyond what the texts state explicitly to uncover what texts *imply*. Now is a good time to begin teaching more critical ways of considering texts because by this time in the reading workshop, children

will have read at least one or two books on a topic and will be well into a third book. You'll say, "When we know a topic well enough (when we've read enough about it), we can see all its sides. We can then ask, 'Are there two ways to look at this topic?'" For example, one way to look at snails is as pests that destroy crops; another way to look at snails is as valuable food, rich in protein. One way to look at King Tut is as a rich and powerful boy king; another way to look at King Tut is as a frail, crippled person who was possibly murdered. Or you can teach children to ask, "Does this topic have two faces?" For example, medieval outfits have two faces: one face shows elegant, colorful, exciting clothes; another face shows clothes that are cumbersome, uncomfortable, impractical, wasteful of fabric. "In our notes, we will want to record the many faces of a topic," you'll want to suggest. Urge children to make notes that contrast the different sides or faces of a topic, using icons and sketches or a T-chart.

Another lesson to consider from reading workshop is that various authors can have different positions while writing about one topic. In the reading workshop, you're teaching students to ask questions such as "What is this author trying to make me feel about the topic? Why is the author trying to make me feel this?" During reading, you're also teaching them to "read" illustrations to ask: "What subtle messages are the pictures conveying?" An illustration of a chest-banging gorilla with bared teeth will evoke different feelings than a photo of a gorilla strung pitifully on a stalk of bamboo or a photo of a severed gorilla hand next to bottles of beer in the bush meat market. In the writing workshop, you can extend this teaching by showing children how researchers make notes on different sources. "When researchers take notes, we don't just record what one book says. We take our pens and record what one book says versus what another book says. We can jot the name of the text, author, and date of publication, and then we record the angle that one book presents on a topic versus another." You might show children how to construct a simple graphic organizer to create notes that record comparative angles presented in different texts:

<b>Title, Author, Publication Date</b>	<b>What is this book making me feel about the topic (or about some element of this topic)?</b>	<b>How does the author manage to make me feel this way? (Through illustrations? Examples and anecdotes? Choice of words?)</b>
1.		
2.		
3.		



Yet another way to push your writers to create notes that will help them see their topic as multidimensional is to urge them to think, “How might different groups of people see this topic?” You might demonstrate this on a large chart. “Imagine that my topic is *Forests*,” you might say, writing the word *Forests* in the center of the chart and circling it. “I’d want to think of all the different groups associated with this topic. I’d ask, ‘Who lives in forests? Who benefits from cutting down trees in forests? Who buys the wood? Who worries about the trees being cut down? Is there anyone replanting the forests?’” Draw spokes radiating out of the circled word on your chart, and at the end of each spoke, write out one of the various categories of people and life associated with forests, for example, environmentalists, loggers and timber businessmen, carpenters, paper and furniture consumers, local residents, and nesting animals. Teach children to jot notes recording the perspective of each of these groups—for example, timber businessmen will think of profits while environmentalists will worry about the trickle-down hazards of deforestation. Teach them also to analyze and jot down which of these perspectives is represented in a text. You might also teach: “Researchers consider the two faces of a topic to ask ourselves, ‘What is *my* stance, *my* position on this?’ We don’t just pick any old stance to call our own; we look over our notes and all we’ve read about the topic to find a stance with the most compelling reasons or evidences to believe in. We can jot down our own stance in the margins of our notes.”

### Part Three: Research Essayists Search Our Notes for an Arguable Claim, and We Build Up Our Essay Around This

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By now, children’s folders ought to be bulging. They ought to be brimming with notes that don’t just document information about their topic or even reactions and responses to this information but also critical notes that deconstruct and analyze various texts about a topic. We can think of these folders as being comparable to writer’s notebooks, brimming with seeds for future writing projects or artists’ sketchbooks brimming with plans, blueprints, and creative fodder for future paintings. “These folders full of notes aren’t just receptacles or bins into which we’ve thrown all our thoughts and understanding about a topic. These folders are tools. When we use these folders correctly, they can help us see this topic in new ways. They can also help us imagine how we might write *our own essays* about this topic. I want to teach you that the first thing essayists might do, armed with a folder such as ours, is to look across all the entries about the topic and circle ones that we might write more about.” You’ll probably want to teach your writers that just as partway through a story we begin to ask ourselves, “What is this story starting to be *about*?” and we come up with multiple possible ideas and meanings, so as researchers we begin to ask ourselves, “What are some of the big issues and ideas that are starting to seem important here?” as a way to develop things to write about.

At this point, you'll want to nudge your researchers into looking at their folders through the eyes of an essayist, teaching them to unearth a "claim" that may be written longer about. "When we look through your folders with the eyes of an essayist, we can expect to find two kinds of things," you will teach. "First, of course, we will find information about our topic—straight facts that come straight out and tell us something about this topic that we can't really argue over. For example, *King Tut was an Egyptian boy king*, or *Arctic seals need blubber to stay warm*, or *gorillas are mammals*. There is no disputing each of these statements—each book on King Tut or Arctic animals or gorillas has repeated this information over and over again. But there's something else we can expect to find in our notes as well. The second thing that our notes will contain (or help us come up with) are opinions about a topic—something that one can argue about. For example, *King Tut may have been King, but his life couldn't have been happy*, or *Arctic seals may fear Orca whales, but they ought to fear humans even more*, or *Gorillas are misunderstood despite Goodall's work*."

Most children will probably need more help to distinguish between undisputed facts and arguable claims, especially if they are new to this work. You will want to provide plenty of examples of each category, teaching that an undisputed fact about a topic doesn't have two sides to it, no one can deny it, it is commonly accepted and generally well-known information. On the other hand, an arguable claim has two sides. Both sides might have several reasons to support them, but one side will probably have more reasons or more *compelling* reasons—and this is the side we will try to write an essay from.

Also, you'll likely find that many children's folders contain only semideveloped claims or no claim that is clearly arguable from two sides. In this case, you might ask your researchers to specifically revisit the notes they took while examining the two faces of a topic and pick the one that feels more compelling to build a claim from. For instance, if a child's notes reveal that one face of Roman gladiators was that of brave warriors while another face was that of slaves and victims of a cruel society, urge the child to pick the more compelling of these two faces—the one that has more reasons to support it. In such a case, an arguable claim might be: *Some people might think of Roman gladiators as being brave warriors. In fact, they were victims of a cruel society, and they had no choice but to fight till their death*. Another way to help children build claims off their notes is to have them revisit the notes they took on how various texts made them feel about a topic and examine the root of these feelings. For instance, a child might have noted that two texts on sharks made her feel differently. One text made her feel that sharks are bloodthirsty and evil while the other text made her feel that sharks aren't as bad as people think and that they need human protection before they become extinct. You'll want to push this student into picking the more compelling of the two "feelings" and developing a claim: *Sharks aren't as bloodthirsty and evil as most people believe. In fact, sharks need our help*. In both these cases, children's notes contained two sides of a topic, and staking a claim simply meant picking the stronger side. Similarly, if children's notes contain cluster maps representing the various groups of people associated with a topic, ask them to

pick one compelling perspective to write a claim from. Looking back at the cluster map you developed on forests, for instance, a possible claim to come out of those notes might be: *“I want to argue that we should think of finding sources other than wood to make furniture or paper. Most paper and furniture consumers do not wonder about the trees that were cut.”*

It can be helpful to teach children to use certain prompts to develop a claim:

- Although some people believe \_\_\_\_\_, it may actually be argued that \_\_\_\_\_.
- Some people feel that \_\_\_\_\_. In reality, however, \_\_\_\_\_.
- Despite \_\_\_\_\_, I want to argue that \_\_\_\_\_.
- While it may be true that \_\_\_\_\_, the real point to consider is that \_\_\_\_\_.
- Even though most people don’t see \_\_\_\_\_, I want to suggest \_\_\_\_\_.

Note that each of these claims encompasses the counterargument within it. This is a valuable step to teach children because it guarantees a strong thesis, preventing children, at the very outset, from writing an “argument” essay from something that has no real opposition or potential for argument. Provide plenty of examples using these prompts, so that children get the gist and feel of what an argument essay’s claim should sound and feel like. For example:

- **Although some people believe** that penguins are funny, cute, and waddly, **it may be argued that** penguins are the one of the smartest birds.
- **Some people feel that** gorillas are fierce and dangerous. **In reality, however,** they are nowhere as big a danger to humans as humans are to them.
- **Despite** many people thinking that wooden furniture and paper are things we can’t do without, **I want to argue that** it is actually forests that we can’t do without.
- **While it may be true that** NASA has not yet discovered life in outer space, **the real point to consider is that** there certainly might be life on other planets.
- **Even though most people don’t see** trash as something wonderful, **I want to suggest that** trash can be valuable and that recycling is a wonderful thing we can do for the planet.

A solid claim is actually the foundation for the essay. Once children finish poring over the contents of their folders to develop a claim, ask them to share their claims with their partners or clubs. You'll want peers to listen carefully to each other's claims, asking questions such as:

"Can this claim be argued from two sides?"

"Is this a claim or an undisputed fact?"

"Will it be easy to find at least two or three strong reasons or examples to prove this claim?"

"Is it worded in a clear and straightforward way?"

Once your young writers have a claim all developed, you'll want to teach them that we sift through our notes for facts that best support this claim, and then we jot a boxes-and-bullets structure, where the claim serves as the box while the facts to support this claim serve as the bullets. Demonstrate how this is done, using a claim from a nonfiction topic that your children know well, such as sharks:

**Some people feel that** sharks are bloodthirsty predators. **In reality, however,** sharks are not that dangerous to humans.

- They rarely attack humans (fewer than one hundred attacks worldwide per year).
- Even if they do attack, after a bite or two they swim away.
- Many shark attacks are not fatal (only about six per year).
- Most sharks cannot hurt humans, only three species are really dangerous.
- Sharks are "fascinating creatures."

Teach children that each bullet point is either an example, a reason, or a proof that the claim is true and valid. Then give your students time to look over their notes to come up with bulleted evidence for their claim. You might want to teach citation and then let them rehearse and debate this thinking with a partner. Coach into partnerships by teaching them to listen for whether the evidence actually matches and supports the claim and whether it is convincing. You will find that many times your students will need to cross off some evidence and add others. As in the case above, you might model how when you look back on your outline, you realize that

“Sharks are ‘fascinating creatures’” does not necessarily prove that they are not dangerous, and you can either cross that piece of evidence off the list or rewrite it to show exactly what you are trying to say. You might decide to teach also that sometimes this work causes us to reexamine the claim itself, qualifying it a bit or rewriting it entirely.

Probably the next day, you’ll want students to turn their attention to refuting the counterclaim, one that is pretty much the opposite side of their argument. Students will already be familiar with the counterclaim to their argument because their thesis statements contain this counterclaim to begin with. So, for instance, we may demonstrate that we can go back through our notes to find some points that support the counterclaim. Explain from the start that we do this only so that we may poke holes in them or show why they aren’t good enough. Be warned that a fair number of students actually write supporting evidence for their counterclaims with as much conviction as they do for their claim—defeating the purpose of the argument essay. From the outset, explain that the job of an argument essay is to “up” one side and “down” the other. Of course, “downing” the other side necessitates that we explore this other side thoroughly, so we can convince the reader why evidence for the counterclaim is just not compelling enough.

To start, have students write out the counterclaim (box) and then revisit their notes to list the evidence (bullets) that appears to support it:

**Some people feel that** sharks are bloodthirsty predators.

- About thirty species of sharks are known to attack humans.
- Three species are very deadly (great white, bull, tiger).
- Some species can kill you in fresh water as well as salt.
- Humans recount being traumatized as well as injured.
- We have to make cages to keep them out in order to dive safely.

Immediately, then, you will want to explicitly teach your essayists how they might discredit or disprove this evidence for the counterclaim. There are several ways that writers disprove a counterclaim. One way is to say that this evidence for the counterclaim is not always true, that it is random, or that it only represents a minority of cases and therefore cannot be considered a standard or a universal truth. Another way to disprove the evidence for a counterclaim is to show that it is incomplete, that further study shows a truer picture. Yet another way to refute a counterclaim is to state the

evidence for it and then explain why this evidence is misleading in light of *other* evidence that the essayist has researched. For example:

**Counterclaim:** Some people feel that sharks are bloodthirsty predators.

**Evidence:** About thirty species of sharks are known to attack humans.

**Discrediting this evidence by providing other evidence:** However, there are a total of over 350 to 400 kinds of sharks! That means for the 30 species that may have attacked humans, there are at least 320 others that haven't! Yet we lump all sharks into this "bloodthirsty" image.

Show students they will sometimes need to go back to their notes to gather more facts or examples that specifically discredit the counterclaim evidence.

Also, teach children that some specific transitions are particularly helpful to use in refuting a counterclaim. Just after stating what sounds like compelling evidence for the counterclaim, we want to begin our *next* sentence with one of the following transitions:

- nevertheless
- still
- despite this/in spite of
- however
- but

These transitions alert the reader that a disclaimer to what they have just read is about to follow. Their very nature is to cast doubt on what has just been stated.

This is also a good time to teach writers a "partner lesson" on how to give feedback. Teach them that we use our partners to rehearse and debate claims and to give each other feedback on how valid and compelling our claims seem. You might teach partners to listen for these qualities in their partner's rehearsal of different sides of arguments—a preponderance of evidence, and the writer's seeming passion for that side. For instance, you may demonstrate by rehearsing that sharks are dangerous, and your body language and tone of voice might show a certain intensity, and your examples may be compelling. But then rehearse that sharks are *not that dangerous*, and make your body language and tone of voice even more intense and passionate. Show partners how, thus, to really help each other discover which ideas or claims are beginning to stir them up, because writers want to work with topics they come to care



about deeply. You may extend this lesson with a mid-workshop teaching point where you show partners that sometimes, the research writer's tone of voice and body language show passion, but their evidence isn't as compelling for that side as for the other side of the argument—and thus in response to partner feedback, the researcher may want to return to his or her texts and gather more evidence.

Now that your essayists have a claim, some evidence for this claim, a counterclaim, and some evidence or logic to discredit this counterclaim, you'll want to push them into actually drafting their essay. Urge them to use the first paragraph to assert their topic and paragraphs two, three, and/or four to present elaborated evidence for their claim. Then, in the following two or three paragraphs, they might introduce and shoot down the counterclaim. Once writers are at this stage, you may teach any number of craft and revision moves to build up the level of their work. Your teaching here will allow your students to support "a point of view with reasons and information," to quote the Common Core State Standards, which require students to "introduce a topic or text clearly, state an opinion, and create an organizational structure in which ideas are logically grouped to support the writer's purpose." You will help students hone their organization and purpose, using specific craft moves and revisions.

## **Part Four: Essayists Develop and Revise Our Paragraphs Until We Have a Strong Essay**

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You'll want to draw on the revision work your students did in the previous unit on information writing and remind them to bring forward all they know about ways to structure, elaborate, and craft expository writing. In the informational writing unit of study (and in previous essay units, such as personal essay), the revision work mainly supported expository structure and best ways to organize information or evidence to fully support a topic or claim. The revision part of the unit begins with students treading new ground with research-heavy revision work. Then students move into incorporating familiar moves from past units, keeping in mind that expository writers revise in predictable ways.

A large part of the revision work will be not just organizing the data students have already collected, but making decisions about what further research they need to conduct in order to best substantiate their claims. As you move into revision work, most of your students will most likely still be adding to their drafts, thinking about the best way to organize information within each section to best support a claim. Teach your students that research writers study each section as they draft, making a plan to collect information to shore up each section.

Another powerful way for your writers to revise is to consider more deeply the order of information. You may teach your essayists that sometimes we go for the most provocative evidence first, to lure our reader in. At other times, we may go for the most commonly quoted, least disputed evidence last, to leave our reader with a compelling sense of being convinced. If we write our essay, for instance, to substantiate

the claim that *Sharks are often misunderstood*, we may consider whether we want to start with how an attack on Lester Stillwell in Matawan Creek, New Jersey, led people to think that we are in danger from sharks even in fresh water or if we want to start with the statistic that a person is more likely to be hit by a car or struck by lightning, than bitten by a shark. Similarly, we may consider whether we want to *end* with the statistic about being hit by a car or if we want to end with statistics about shark populations disappearing. The main thing is that there is no right or wrong—what’s important is that writers learn to take these choices seriously and to spend some time considering the effect these switches may have on their writing and their reader.

Because your students are writing research essays and the goal of this work is to convince readers to agree with a claim, it is valuable to teach right away that writers don’t just cite facts and information; they “unpack” this information for the reader, using transition words and phrases to link information to the claim. Part of this session will also be coaching your writers into taking a closer look at the data they have collected and asking, “Does this really support what I’m trying to prove? And if so, how?”

In another session, you’ll want to teach some strategies to use when paraphrasing. Teach your writers to identify specific parts of their research that they would like to integrate and to reread their notes. Then, either on their own or in partnerships, writers can say the information in two different ways, really focusing on bringing out main ideas. Partners can help each other both to choose the best words to teach the ideas and to make sure that the new version is different enough from the old. Writers will need to make choices about what information should be paraphrased and what information might need to be quoted directly. One key tip to tuck into this section, perhaps in a mid-workshop teaching point, is that even when we paraphrase, we still cite sources. You could teach your writers to use stems such as “According to . . .” or “As . . . teaches us . . .” before paraphrasing.

Another revision move is to build on the vocabulary work from the information writing unit of study. Remind your writers that our writing will have a more authoritative tone if we employ technical vocabulary—what the Common Core State Standards call “domain language,” and what we might call the jargon or lingo of experts. So, if we say that sharks have “retractable” jaws that allow them to tear at and swallow their prey, it shows a higher level of expertise than if we say that sharks have jack-in-the-box jaws or “cool” jaws. If we do include high-level technical vocabulary in our writing, then we also have a responsibility to our reader to explain that vocabulary, unless we are writing for an equally expert audience. You may teach your writers, then, that writers often explain new terms with the use of a second sentence or with parentheses. For instance, if we write that Egyptians glorified their dead more than we do, and one way we know this is that they buried their dead through a process called mummification, we need to explain mummification. It might look like:

Egyptians buried their dead through a process called mummification. Mummification involved pulling the organs out of the body and soaking it in nitrates to preserve it.

Egyptians buried their dead through a process called mummification (pulling the organs out of the body, and soaking it in nitrates to preserve it).

Your writers have undoubtedly been picking up a wide range of higher-level vocabulary in their research. If you teach them to use and explain that vocabulary, they're more likely both to retain it and to be alert for those cues as they read harder nonfiction.

Many of our writers are highly skilled at narrative writing, and this is an essential tool of persuasive writing as well. Simply read a newspaper article or journal, and you'll see how nonfiction writers interest and persuade their audience through specific anecdotes—and how they know how to gain sympathy for their ideas through the perspectives they represent. Invite your writers to use their narrative powers, zooming in on the most critical moment of an anecdote, which is usually the moment of greatest trouble, to get their reader's attention—and then invite them as well to hone their representation of characters so that the perspective offered will create sympathy for their claim. You might, for instance, demonstrate with a “true” story about the demise of the snail:

The snail creeps along the bottom of the leaf, seeking the tasty part for his breakfast.

“This part looks tasty,” perhaps he thinks, as he makes his slow way along in the sunshine. Little does he know that he is about to be harvested himself.

As your students near the end of this unit and have taken some time to revise, you will then turn their attention to introductions and conclusions. When approaching all non-narrative writing, we generally suggest that you teach these later instead of sooner. How do you know how to start or end a piece until you know what makes up the middle? At this point, your fifth graders most likely know the purposes of an introduction. They know that the introduction should draw readers in, should help them to understand why the topic is so important, and should entice them to read on. They know that an introduction sets the readers up to know what they will be reading about, what the parts will be, and, of course, what the big topic or thesis is. Teach your writers that in a research essay, the writer positions the reader to understand the issue, perhaps by presenting both sides and then making it clear for the reader which side he or she is planning to support. You could teach your writers to begin with a lovely quote or anecdote that draws the reader in right from the start.

You might send students back to mentor texts, to see how authors invite readers into a subject. As with any strategy, help your students see possibilities, and then allow them to experiment and choose the ones that best fit their piece. Do the same then with conclusions to books and articles, studying what authors do and giving your writers a chance to try some out. Will they end their writing with an “In the

future” or a “Next steps” section that is forward looking? Or will they end looking backward, at the role their topic played in the world or changing history?

To celebrate the work that children have accomplished in this month, you might decide to create a website or blog where the class’s essays are published. You might set up a system for peers to respond to each other’s essays online—and perhaps a monitored external audience may do so as well. You’ll want to give your writers opportunities to type and upload their essays—perhaps adding a “process log” that also explains the research and note-making that occurred backstage! If you have access to a scanner, you might allow children to upload images of various sketch-notes or graphic organizers that they created en route to developing their essays. Also, remind children that since their work is being published, they’ll want to give credit to the sources that they referred to while gathering information, and ask them to develop a bibliography of the text set that they used. Since a club shared a text set, this bibliography might be created collectively by club members. You’ll want to teach them a citation format. Students will be particularly encouraged to see comments and feedback from the principal, parents, other teachers, and students on their blog or website and for their individual essays, so you’ll want to find ways to advertise your children’s work and invite a supportive web audience. The hope is that your future writers/essayists/bloggers take away a sense of what it means to do this work and do it with a greater sense of agency and independence in the future.

## Additional Resources

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This unit is intended for students who have already written personal and persuasive essays such as those described in the fourth-grade unit on essays. Chances are, your students have also learned to write fast drafts of essays as part of their preparation for state tests. One way to assess your writers’ readiness for this unit, then, is to look over prior essays to see how they hold up in terms of structure and focus. Or, to be more closely aligned with all the skills you’ll be teaching here, you might choose to use a performance assessment that provides students with a few texts on the same subject, asks them to gather and evaluate information, and then has them draft a persuasive essay staking a claim.

Along the way, you’ll want to keep an eye first on students’ note-taking. Check to make sure they have systems for keeping track of their notes. And look within the notes to make sure some students aren’t just jotting random facts. If they are, you may need to linger longer in Part One of the unit, which teaches some note-taking systems. In Parts Two and Three, students work on coming up with claims and supporting these with evidence. Again, we rely on some prior skills with drafting paragraphs of essays, including using anecdotes and facts to support ideas. If students need extra support, you might return to some of the teaching of the fourth-grade personal essay unit to prop them up.

## One Possible Sequence of Teaching Points

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### Part One: Research Essayists Collect Information and Make Notes

- “Essayists take research notes in precise, thoughtful ways because we expect to use these notes later when we begin drafting an essay on this topic. We record the most important information about a topic and also some of our questions and reactions to this information.”
- “Researchers’ notes don’t look the same even when we’re making notes from the exact same texts. Each one of us is an author of our own notes, so we can make choices about whether we want to make sketch-notes or lists, timelines or webs, idea clusters or Post-it charts, tables or Venn diagrams. When we make notes for our future use, researchers don’t just use one way—we make a choice about the most efficient and effective way to write our notes.”
- “While making notes, researchers discover that a specific note-making format often works best in a certain situation. For example, if the text is expository, it makes sense to use boxes and bullets to record it; if it is narrative, it makes more sense to make a timeline. If we’re comparing and contrasting or listing pros and cons, we might make a T-chart. If we’re comparing three or more categories, we may make a table with three or more columns. Researchers make note-making efficient by choosing the best way to record a particular kind of information.”
- “Research notes are short and to the point. While making notes, researchers try to paraphrase and shorten text, using our own words where we can. We certainly don’t lift extensively from the text—and where we do lift a quote, we make sure to use quotation marks and cite the source.”
- “Research notes don’t just record what the text says. They also contain our responses to this text. We are the authors of our notes, so we make sure to include our own ideas, feelings, and questions alongside the information that we’re recording. We do this because we know that when we use these notes to write essays, our *opinions* will be as important as the *information* we’re gleaning from texts.”
- “Researchers treat our notes as valuable tools. We store and organize these notes efficiently; we constantly revisit and categorize old notes as we add new ones. We take care to keep them in a folder or notebook from where we may easily access them when we need to.”

## Part Two: While Making Notes, Researchers Examine the Many Sides of a Topic

- “When we know a topic well enough (when we’ve read enough about it), researchers begin see all its sides. We can then ask, ‘Are there two ways to look at this topic?’ For example, one way to look at snails is as pests that destroy crops. Another way to look at snails is as valuable food, rich in protein. In our notes, we can record and compare both these faces, revisiting the text to collect examples for each face of our topic.”
- “A way to uncover two sides of a topic is to note that various authors can have different positions while writing about it. We ask questions such as ‘What is this author trying to make me feel about the topic? Why is the author trying to make me feel this?’ In our notes, we note and compare the feelings that different texts evoke, and we list the craft choices or illustration details of each text that contribute to making us feel this way.”
- “Another way that researchers cover the many faces of a topic is to think, ‘How might different groups of people see this topic? How are different groups of people affected by this topic?’ For example, if our topic is *Forests*, the different groups associated with this topic would include environmentalists, timber businessmen, carpenters, consumers, local residents, and nesting animals. In our notes, we try to think and jot how each of these groups might see certain elements about this topic differently.”
- “Researchers consider the two faces of a topic to ask ourselves, ‘What is *my* stance, *my* position on this?’ We don’t just pick any old stance to call our own; we look over our notes and all we’ve read about the topic to find a stance with the most compelling reasons or evidences to believe in and list these.”

## Part Three: Research Essayists Search Our Notes for an Arguable Claim, and We Build Up Our Essay Around This

- “Once researchers have enough notes on a topic to compare and contrast its different faces and issues, we start to look at the bigger picture of this topic and ask, ‘What are some of the big issues and ideas that are important to write more about?’ To do this, we first look through our notes to separate undisputed facts about this topic from arguable claims.”
- “One way to find a strong arguable claim for our topic is to look across our notes to study the many faces of our topic that we’ve recorded, or the different feelings that writers have tried to inspire for this topic, or the perspective of different



people on this topic. We pick the most compelling of these and try to jot down more arguments in its favor.”

- “When possible arguments about a topic begin to occur to us, essayists capture these in a claim or thesis statement. One way to write the thesis statement (claim) of an argument essay is to start by stating something that an opposite side might say but then add what we would like to argue instead. (‘Although some people believe . . . , it may actually be argued that . . .’).”
- “Once we know the argument that we want to forward, essayists look back at all our notes to come up with a list of reasons or examples that may serve as evidence of our argument. We jot down each of these and elaborate them further to form different paragraphs for the essay.”
- “Essayists also look at the possible evidence to support the opposite side’s argument. We jot down all possible evidence that may support the counterclaim, adding a transition like *nevertheless, but, however, despite this . . .* to refute each argument, showing that it is inaccurate, incomplete, not representative of all situations, or deficient in some other way. In this way, essayists develop a paragraph or two in which we discredit the counterclaim.”

#### **Part Four: Essayists Develop and Revise Our Paragraphs Until We Have a Strong Essay**

- “Essayists revise the order in which we present the reader with information. We wonder what to put first, what to present next, and what to reveal at the end.”
- “Sometimes essayists paraphrase and cite portions from texts. When we do this, we use our own words to summarize a point in the book. At other times, we quote directly from the text, in which case we use quotation marks. In both cases, we make sure to cite the book and author we’re referring to.”
- “Essayists write like an ‘insider’ to a topic by using domain-specific vocabulary. We stay on the lookout for places where we might need to define vocabulary words that are connected to the topic that might be hard for readers to understand. Writers keep in mind common ways that information writers teach important words and decide which way will be best for each word.”
- “Essayists sometimes insert an anecdote (narrative writing) into our essays to create a powerful impact on the reader by providing an example of something compelling about our topic.”

- “Essayists revise the introduction of our information books, thinking about how we can set readers up to be experts in the topic and how we can draw readers in right from the start.”
- “Essayists revise our concluding section, taking care to sum up the important information and also leave readers with some big ideas.”



## UNIT FIVE

# Historical Fiction or Fantasy Fiction

### JANUARY/FEBRUARY

*Note to teachers: This month, we are offering a choice between historical fiction or fantasy fiction. You will have the chance at the end of the year to take up whichever genre you leave aside at this time. Both genres offer opportunities for your writers to extend their narrative writing skills and to connect deeply to reading through apprenticeship to authors in the same genre. We do recommend that, whichever genre you select, you also teach the same genre in your reading workshop. (The 2011–2012 Reading Curricular Calendar offers these same choices for this month.)*

#### Option One: Historical Fiction

This version of the unit offers more higher-level writing lessons than the fourth-grade version, though some essentials are the same. Your writers by now have written narratives often. It benefits writers enormously to have an opportunity to return to a genre, working once again in that genre—only this time with greater control, using strategies learned earlier with greater finesse. When writers work more than once in a genre, they can progress from doing as they're told toward using all they know to accomplish their own big goals. It also gives students an opportunity to have additional opportunities to meet the Common Core State Standards' expectations, which suggest students need to have increasing control of narrative writing, while also being more equipped to analyze an author's craft and structure as readers of narratives. The more students return to narrative genres, the more extensive understanding of craft they can control, such as building tension, establishing and developing internal conflicts, and using domain-specific language. Be sure to look at the fiction stories your

students wrote during the earlier fiction unit and to do an on-demand assessment so that you approach the unit with a clear sense of what your students have mastered and what they need to learn to do. Although your students will be a diverse group, with some having more and some less skill as writers, you'll probably also see that there are some things you will have taught many of them to be able to do, and other things that few have learned—yet. Because students will be willing to work with great zeal on the work of this unit, the unit represents a terrific opportunity for skill development. Last year teacher after teacher who taught this unit glowed about the high levels of engagement and productivity they saw among their writers. They also saw enormous jumps in their students' craft and independence.

For many teachers, the unit also offers a nice parallel to a reading unit on historical fiction. If your students are reading historical fiction as well as writing it, which we will assume in this write-up, then this provides you with a wonderful opportunity to teach your students that writers read texts that others have written through the lens of being a writer. As writers, students can read with an awareness of the craft moves that an author has made and can even try some of these craft moves in their own writing. It may be, for example, the students note that an author has inserted historical objects, clothing, and inventions into a historical fiction text, and so some students decide to do the same in their writing. Then, too, readers can be taught to notice moments when they have strong emotional responses to their books and to study what the author has done to make those moments matter. During writing, students can try to create their own such moments. Of course this will mean that writers need to read with the eyes of insiders, attending not only to being moved but also to recognizing the craft choices the writer made in order to affect them. By partnering this writing unit with the same genre in their reading work, you can provide students many opportunities to carry strengths from one discipline to another. The fact that students are writing as well as reading historical fiction will make them far more astute readers, and this, in turn, will enrich their book club conversations and help them to look across texts through the lens of *how* writers develop themes, characters, and settings. This, of course, is an important goal in the Common Core State Standards.

Teachers, as you think about what your goals will be for the unit, think also about how you can help your students care about the unit, too. It is always important to launch a unit by rallying students around the big work that they'll be doing in a unit. You'll need to decide how to market this unit to your students. In one class, a teacher might say, "You all have done some amazing reading this year and some amazing writing. This time, we're going to put those two kinds of work together. You'll be reading historical fiction, which is a particularly passionate, exciting kind of story, and you'll be writing historical fiction, and you'll be able to try out, in your own writing, all the cool things that you see authors doing in the books you are reading." Another teacher may decide to market the unit differently. "Historical fiction lends itself to figuring out the relationship between characters and the place.

In realistic fiction, the setting might be a school and the author assumes you know what the school is like, but in historical fiction, the author creates the place . . . and you need to think hard about the relationship between the place and the characters. This unit will help you write—and read—with a more careful eye to the ways setting is used in stories. You will use all you know about good writing to help readers live in the world of that setting.” In yet another class a teacher might say, “This year we have been thinking so much about the ways we can make our voices heard. We’ve learned that narrative writing can help us tell stories about moments that matter and essay writing can help us tell about ideas we think need to be shared. During this unit in historical fiction, we’ll tell stories of people who made their voices heard in the past.”

### **Before the Unit Begins: Making Decisions about How Students Will Learn about a Time Period**

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There is one aspect of historical fiction that involves some special attention. It is essential that the writer knows about the historical period in which his or her story will be set. You can decide whether you want your students to prioritize this historical research or just gesture toward doing a bit of it.

If you decide that you want to use the invitation to write historical fiction as a way to lure students into an active, invested study of a particular time and place in history, you will probably structure your social studies curriculum work so that your class studies a historical era and then all of them set their historical fiction stories within that one era. Students will be more engaged and alert learners of history if they know they’ll be synthesizing and applying their knowledge of history to their own historical fiction stories, so be sure to tell them at the onset about this project aligning with the Common Core State Standards. Be sure, too, that you allow them to learn about the historical era through film and photographs and stories as well as through expository texts, as it will be important for them to develop images of the time and place they can draw upon as they create stories set in that historical context.

Of course, if students are studying an era in social studies, this means that during the reading workshop they can read historical fiction that may not necessarily be set in that historical context but which supports the writing work simply because the texts that students read are exemplars of the genre they’ll write. Of course, it would be amazing if students could be studying one era in social studies and in the reading workshop and could then write a story set within that era, but many teachers do not have multiple copies of enough historical fiction books set in a particular time—say, the Civil War—for the whole class to read only books in that setting. In order to keep kids “in books” during the reading workshop, there must be books enough for the level M readers to read at least ten books in the month and for the level R/S/T/ readers

to read at least four books within the month—and if readers are working in book clubs, the class will need multiple copies of all those books. Most teachers find that during the reading workshop, they do not want to confine all students to reading about just one particular era but want instead to make use of all the multiple copies of wonderful historical fiction novels they have on hand.

It's possible, however, that you don't really have access to a separate social studies time. Another option, then, is to lean on your read-aloud work and minilessons during the reading workshop to provide students with knowledge of a historical era in which to set their stories. This means selecting a time and place in history for all your read-alouds during the unit and asking students to situate their historical fiction stories in that same era. If, for instance, you decide that although during the reading workshop different clubs will be reading multiple copies of the full range of historical fiction books, all your read-alouds could still focus on a topic such as the civil rights movement. Our website ([www.readingandwritingproject.com](http://www.readingandwritingproject.com)) has lists compiled by teachers throughout the country of much-loved genre-specific titles. For example, if you've decided to focus on civil rights and to ask students to set their historical fiction stories within this context, you might put together a read-aloud collection of *Goin' Someplace Special* (McKissack), *The Other Side* (Woodson), *Freedom on the Menu: The Greensboro Sit-Ins* (Weath), and *The Bat Boy and His Violin* (Curtis). If you choose this second option, you'll want not only to situate all your read-aloud work within the one selected era but also to read aloud some relevant nonfiction material related in content and theme to the time period. Even if your nonfiction materials are slim, some teachers who have tried this option in the past gathered folders of articles and photos from the time period and have surveyed their nonfiction materials and created one-page "fact sheets" on important people, issues, places, and events during various periods for students to use as supplemental materials.

If you have assessed your students in previous units to be the sort of writers and researchers who can navigate and synthesize various nonfiction sources, and you have a lot of sources on many time periods available, and your students have time to read independently and deeply, then you may give your students this opportunity to choose *any* time period in which they are passionately interested, gather their own resources, and collaborate in studies of a time period. Often, this choice yields very high engagement, though you may experience a range of historical accuracy (and inaccuracy), since it may be very hard for you to support all your researchers.

One way or another, then, your students will need to do at least some and perhaps a lot of research about the era in which their stories will be set. That research can be transformed because they are researching as writers of historical fiction. Teachers, read ahead to the upcoming description of the first days of the historical fiction writing unit, and think about how the spirit of that work can be brought into whatever research your students do outside the writing workshop as well. You can enliven that research by linking it to the job of writing historical fiction.



## Part One: Launching the Historical Fiction Writing Workshop— Rehearsal Involves Collecting, Selecting between, and Developing Story Ideas

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When the historical fiction unit begins within your writing workshop, you'll want to help students do the work that fiction writers always need to do. Look back on the book *Writing Fiction: Big Dreams, Tall Ambitions* by Calkins and Cruz for minilesson ideas and to remind yourself of how fiction writers live toward a writing project. The important thing to keep in mind is that fiction writers don't begin this work by beginning their stories. Far from it! They instead begin the work by rehearsing for the stories. Rehearsal involves thinking about lots of possible story ideas, generating possible stories, and then, once one has the gist of an idea, thinking deeply about the setting, the characters, and the various ways the story might spin out. When writing a story that is set in a historical era, the need for rehearsal is amplified. The question that a historical fiction writer needs to ask is not just "What would make a great story?" but also "What might have occurred within that time and that place that might make a great story?"

Many teachers find that the best way to start this unit is to teach historical fiction writers to merge the work of dreaming up story ideas with the work of researching the historical era in alignment with the Common Core State Standards. For at least a few days at the start of the unit (if not for longer periods of time before the writing unit begins), students can learn about the historical era from the perspective of someone who wants to create a story set in this time and place. This means that they need to read about the era, thinking, "What possible story ideas are hidden here?" Of course, students will need to learn facts about the time and place and about whatever issue or aspect of life catches their attention especially, but the search for facts will be peripheral and the more important work will be to think deeply about what it was like for people to live through these events, to live in that time and that place. Writers will read, writing notebooks in hand, asking, "What was going on during this time period that might be worth writing about?" This means reading responsively, letting even the littlest facts spark empathy and imagination and envisioning.

When Laurie Halse Anderson worked on her historical fiction book *Fever 1793*, centering around slave ownership in the north during the American Revolution, she stumbled upon the fact that Benjamin Franklin owned slaves. This shocked her and led her down a path of study that ultimately ended up with her book. A pivotal moment for her was seeing a sculpture at the New York Historical Society of a man and woman running for freedom. That image, tied in with all her accumulated facts, led her to hear her main character's voice for the first time.

You may use videos just as you have often used read-aloud books. These videos can be short clips of historical documentaries, such as Ken Burns' "New York," or else five-minute clips of historical fiction pieces such as those from *The American Girl* series. These visuals can help students get a great sense of historical time periods as well as

lead a fiction writer to jot story ideas. You might show your class that a fiction writer's notebook includes lots of little story ideas—blurbs about how possible stories could go.

## Part Two: Developing Your Story—Shaping Historically True Characters and Plots

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In follow-up minilessons you might also teach students that writers of historical fiction can try to collect and study information about not just the events of the period but also the details of daily life, personal and social issues, inventions, and even important places. Continue to remind them to pause and ask, “What stories do you think are hidden here?” As students study, they jot down facts, write longer entries about what they imagine and envision, make sketches, and even paste photographs into their notebooks. Their research will reflect a need to know about a whole range of topics—fashions, modes of transportation, schools, gender roles, and events. A common mantra you may come back to again and again is, “What stories do you think are hidden here?”

Of course, as students collect story ideas in their writer's notebooks, they'll draw on not only their knowledge of the era but also their knowledge of the genre. They'll draw on the work they will have done in the reading workshop reading historical fiction. All of the reading work that they do will have ramifications for the writing work that you help them to do. For example, Sessions IV and V of the book supporting reading historical fiction (*Tackling Complex Texts: Historical Fiction in Book Clubs*) highlight the fact that readers of historical fiction need to construct two timelines in their minds as they read. They must construct a timeline of the historical events that are going on that affect the story, and they must construct a story of the main character's plotline. And here is the important thing that the reading unit of study spotlights: readers of historical fiction books will notice that the historical timeline intersects with a character's timeline. Events happen in history, and the protagonist reacts to those events. If you have taught minilessons to your readers in which you channel them to read historical fiction with an eye toward the two intersecting timelines, then you may well suggest that writers of historical fiction can create a timeline for the events that are underway in an era and think about the storylines that might intersect with the historical timeline.

You can teach your historical fiction writers not only to collect ideas for stories but also to test out those ideas by drawing on all they know about the era and about the genre. To test a story idea against knowledge of the era, a writer might reread his or her entries and ask, “Does this make sense for the time period? Does it ring true? What is a different way it could go?” For example, a student may have jotted in her notebook that she could write a story about a boy in the Civil War who wants to spend time with his older brother but he is working all the time, so they drive together to Florida on vacation. After asking herself if the story makes sense for the period and rings true, the writer could revise the story blurb to say, “I could write a story about a boy in the Civil War who wants to spend time with his older brother but their family is divided and he is on the Confederate side, so . . .” Help students to think even

about little details such as naming the character with a time-appropriate name and thinking about period-based motivations.

Some writers will seem to be more wed to historical facts than to story ideas. You might remind these writers that they are first and foremost story writers. You could say, “Writers, when I collect ideas for historical fiction writing, I want to make sure that I am still writing about people and issues that feel true to me. Remember that when we wrote realistic fiction, we learned that we can take the real struggles of our own lives and give those struggles to a character. You can still do that when writing historical fiction.” You could then show your students that for you, one of the biggest challenges to this day is, say, getting along with your older brother. You could teach students that people in history struggled with the same issues, and we can think about how those struggles may have looked, if set in another time and place, “Okay, so now let me see . . . I want to set my story in the Revolutionary War . . . and I want to make it a story about a boy who gets into an argument with his brother. Oh, I know, I learned that young boys weren’t supposed to go to war but some lied about their age and got in anyway, so maybe this boy wants to fight, but his older brother knows the boy is too young. Maybe they have an argument and. . . .”

After a day of collecting story blurbs, writers begin to settle upon one or two possible story ideas (one that imagines a character with some motivations, who gets involved in an action/problem/struggle), and then it will be important for writers to do the work of making their protagonists become more real. Students can return to strategies they remember from past years’ realistic fiction experiences and create a quick entry about their characters’ internal and external characteristics. They might want to get to know their characters more by thinking about their characters’ motivations and obstacles. You might also coach students to try writing a single everyday scene in their notebooks that brings their character and their storyline to life. The scene would likely be an everyday scene—the challenge will be for the historical fiction writer to live in the shoes of his or her character while that character is having supper with family or traveling to school in the morning. This work of writing a quick scene can help students comprehend the way in which they’ll be writing a story that is like every other fiction story they have ever written and the way in which this story writing puts extra demands on them. Meanwhile, the scene allows you to assess whether your students are remembering the instruction from previous narrative units about writing in a scene—the importance of using dialogue and small actions, of writing the external and the internal story, of making movies in one’s mind and storytelling rather than summarizing. You will probably look across these trial scenes and make some choices about the whole-class mini-lessons you need to teach and about the small group as well.

Students will then need to be guided to choose a final story idea that they will want to take all the way through the writing process toward publication. This is an important time to have your eyes everywhere. Many students will be drawn to writing novel-sized stories, which will almost inevitably lead to a lot of summarizing and not a lot of small moment development. Help them realize that the story they write needs to revolve around two or, at most, three small moments.

It will then be important for students to settle upon a tool that can help them plan out and storytell the progression in their stories. One method for doing this involves using blank story booklets, made from folded copy paper or loose-leaf. Writers can be encouraged to sketch a microsequence of events that might constitute their story across the four (only!) pages of their booklets and then to touch each page and storytell that moment to themselves or to a partner. The power of these booklets is that they are fun to make, and therefore it is easy for students to make half a dozen story booklets, with each representing yet another possible way that the story could unfold.

An alternate way to rehearse for a story involves writers making a double timeline—one timeline showing the historical struggle of the era, and one showing the protagonist's personal struggle. Your students might look back to their own book club books and to read-alouds to see various ways stories can begin, some with a historical struggle and some with personal tensions. Explain that in some historical fiction, the big problem a character faces is, in fact, the historical struggle, such as slavery in *Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry*, by Mildred Taylor, or enlistment in the army in *My Brother Sam Is Dead*, by James Lincoln Collier. In others, the struggle is a more personal one, as in *Sarah Plain and Tall*, by Patricia MacLachlan, such as learning to love someone or adjusting to a family change, with the historical setting functioning really as a backdrop.

As students rehearse for the stories they will be drafting soon, the reading-writing connections will be coming at them from all sides, because during reading time as well as during writing time, you'll mention that whatever students notice in the books they are reading should affect their work in the books they are writing. Many of your reading minilessons—minilessons such as those in Session I ("Constructing the Sense of Another Time"), Session VII ("Scrutinizing, Not Skipping, Descriptions"), Session IX ("Making Significance"), and Session XV ("Seeing Power in Its Many Forms") from *Tackling Complex Texts: Historical Fiction in Book Clubs* will have important implications for writers of historical fiction.

### Part Three: Drafting and Revision—Crafting a Compelling Historical Fiction Story

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Once students have experimented with ways their stories could go and set a draft plan, they will begin drafting. Students may plan to write each of the two or three scenes from their booklets or timelines on a new sheet or two of loose-leaf. As they prepare to draft, teach your students that historical fiction writers set the scene, letting the reader know, through the details they include, when and where this story takes place. Invite clubs to reread the opening scene from their historical fiction mentor texts, noticing how one author might have both explicitly stated the date and included period-specific details, like in *The Babe and I*, while another author might bring readers into a scene through a character's actions and then layer in period details, like in *The Bat Boy and His Violin*. Show your students how to use these same strategies in their own writing.

It is predictable that later your students will need to revise for historical accuracy, so you may write your draft so that it will end up needing this revision, too. You might say, “Oops, in my story Polly wrote a letter that only took two days to arrive! But this book about the colonies said that everything took days and days to travel from state to state, so I’ll have to change that detail in my story.” Although historical accuracy will be important in the long run, when your students are starting their stories, by far the most important thing for you to stress will be the importance of storytelling rather than summarizing.

As students move from working on their lead to writing their draft, one of the minilessons you’ll probably teach will revolve around helping them to handle shifts of time in their stories. One part of the challenge will be that some stories require a bit of background information, more than what can be told in sequential order. Students whose stories fall into this category will need to be able to convey the events that have already happened through use of back stories and flashbacks. In a back story, the character often describes something that already happened: “I had a brother once, named John, but he fell down a well, and my parents were never the same after that.” A flashback brings the reader right to the earlier time: “When my mother handed baby Thomas to me and I had him in my arms, I remembered the night, six months earlier, when I had been trying to get to sleep, and I suddenly heard a sharp cry. I knew right away it was baby Thomas and I knew something was wrong.” Even if your students don’t master this craft, studying and trying it will expand their writing terrain and also help their reading.

If you gather your students’ drafts and think about the teaching that their drafts require, you will probably find that many of your young writers have tended toward the melodramatic. Characters will be getting killed in battle, or suffering horrific injuries, or rising up like superheroes to defeat the enemy. You can decide whether to let the melodrama remain or whether to teach them to revise for believability. A good place to practice this revision is in the scene where the main character faces a crisis, choice, or problem. This is where you can teach them to make their character believable, flawed, or complicated, by basing their character on people they know or their own observations and self-reflections. You might model this by saying, “Maybe instead of making my character defeat the British soldiers all by himself, I should think about what could really happen in life. Usually when things get better in our school, it is not just one person who changed everything.”

When working with your strongest writers, you can help them make sure their characters are complex and changeable. You might coach them to return to their original double timelines to see if the internal change they were originally imagining for their main character is in fact playing out and if it might help to develop the complexity of the character as well as their character arc. You might show them that different writers show complexity in character by, for example, having the character do or say one thing while thinking something different.

Through the entire writing process, encourage students to sometimes bring their drafts to book club discussions. Students can trade drafts and place Post-its on each other’s writing with their inferences and interpretations. The club can then discuss



these texts as readers (not as a writing response group), giving the writer a window into what readers are truly taking away from their drafts!

Finally, you can teach your students that historical fiction stories can end without having to resolve the historical struggle—true, one character could potentially work to overcome and might even have great influence within a particular struggle, but usually one character, especially a fictitious character, will most likely not defeat the entire British army, give women the right to vote, or solve the stock market crisis. As students tend to critique how satisfying the ending was at the completion of their book club books, you can teach them to consider if their own storylines were tied up or not and how to leave the ending satisfying while still historically accurate. This is a time, once again, to be wary of the Superman-type endings. We might coach a student who is considering an ending like, “So maybe in the end Ben can be so worried about his brother that he tells Abraham Lincoln that he needs to free the slaves,” and we might suggest that he instead consider something the character discovers about himself or about his brother that was hiding there all along. He might try out something like, “Maybe Ben learns that while he cannot change what happens to his brother, Ben will still always remember his brother as the one who believed in him. Or *maybe*. . . .”

Historical fiction often has more of a sense of being unsettled or lacking resolution than other fictions, perhaps because it so closely resembles true historical events. Often these stories, such as *Number the Stars*, by Lois Lowry, or *Rose Blanche*, by Roberto Innocenti, are about bearing witness. In the story you write, you can show your students how, as you think hard about revising your final scene, you can decide whether your story will be one that celebrates overcoming adversity or one that bravely bears witness to suffering in order to call humanity to learn from the past and take action in the future.

## Part Four: Editing and Publishing—Preparing the Historical Fiction Story for Readers

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In the final days of the unit, you will make decisions about what types of editing lessons your students need both as a whole class and in small groups. Historical fiction, and really any sort of narrative writing, can be a perfect opportunity to study how the syntax of the narrator is often different from that of the characters, and even each character’s syntax might be different from other characters’. *Catching Up on Conventions* (Francois and Zonana) has a powerful section about teaching students code-switching, how different contexts require different forms of grammar or punctuation. Or writers could also really benefit from the sentence-apprenticeship work from *The Power of Grammar* (Ehrenworth) where students can lift mentor sentences from historical fiction books they are reading and try out the syntax and punctuation in their own writing, aligning with the Common Core State Standards.

This is also a time to remind your writers that they already know a great deal about ways to edit their pieces. This might mean revisiting editing checklists or charts you



have gathered across the year and teaching your writers that they can read their pieces slowly, look through one lens at a time (more sophisticated writers could probably hold on to several) as they reread, stopping at each sentence to ask themselves, “Did I \_\_\_\_\_ correctly in this sentence?” For example, historical fiction writers could pay attention to words they chose to use to describe objects, places, or people and then edit for word choice, researching to see if there are more historically specific ways to name them. Or they might consider how punctuation changes the sound of characters’ voices—short and choppy, long-winded, excitable. They may look for verb tense, checking that they are maintaining that consistently, either using past tense throughout to indicate the historical nature of the events they are describing, or perhaps using present tense to help readers feel as if they are running right alongside the protagonist.

Students will then publish their stories. Some teachers suggested that students pair their narrative with some of the historical artifacts they collected during the first week of the unit, like including a few graphics or photographs with their story. At the end of the unit, you will be amazed how far your students (and you) have come in this study. Historical fiction is not a simple genre, yet through your support and guidance your students will have learned both to write within this genre and to read within it but also to have better control and understanding of narrative craft and structure in general. You will no doubt wish to celebrate their accomplishments in grand public ways. An obvious choice might be to have students dress up as a character from their story during your celebration, perhaps even speaking as if they are in the time period as they talk with one another, or perhaps have groups work together to act out brief moments from a few student stories.

## Word Study to Support Writing Workshop

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As mentioned earlier in this write-up, this is a good time for kids to develop some domain-specific vocabulary, or “expert” vocabulary. Mysteries are full of words like *perpetrator*, *investigator*, and *red herring*. Fantasy often has archaic, medieval words such as *saddlebags* and *abode*. Historical fiction will be full of historical terms such as *hearth*, *homestead*, and *pinafore*. Your writers can create individual and shared word banks of the domain language they are collecting as they read, and they can weave these into their writing. If you have connected your historical fiction work with your social studies instruction, you will want to make a point of showing your students how the word wall from your content-area instruction will be a particularly useful tool—especially for the young historical fiction writer who is looking to incorporate authenticity in his or her writing.

## Additional Resources

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Before the unit begins, you will likely want to spend some time helping your students develop understanding of the genre. Some teachers have begun their reading unit of

historical fiction book clubs a week or so before their writing unit to help their writers have the sound of the genre in their ears. Others have used short texts in read-aloud to support this. Another option might be to have book clubs use picture books or short stories (like *The Babe and I* or *The Bat Boy and His Violin*) during the week before this unit. A quick and effective addition might be to show brief movie or television clips in the genre. The decision for how and how much to expose your students to the genre before launching the writing depends strongly on your students and your resources.

You will also likely find it invaluable to start the unit with a quick on-demand writing assessment that will help you make teaching decisions about the unit in general. This might go one of two ways. If you want to use this unit as a way to develop further students' narrative writing ability, then you might start the unit with an on-demand of realistic fiction, especially since your students have not written fiction since last year. You might say, "I'd like to see how much you know about writing fiction. Would you write a short fiction small moment, or scene, during our writing time today?" If, instead, you want this unit to push their narrative writing but you particularly want to know what they already know about historical fiction and are ready to learn, you might start with developing their understanding of the genre first, and after they are introduced to the genre, you might have them write a historical fiction on-demand. After the pieces are collected, you can use them to help tailor the unit so that students are spending time on topics where more instruction is needed and you are not reteaching topics students have already mastered.

Clearly, the decisions for which teaching points you ultimately choose to teach will be dictated by your assessments of your students' needs and what they need to learn most in order to move as writers. If you feel that your students are really struggling with narrative writing in general, or you feel less than secure in your own mastery of the genre, you might opt to refer to the fourth-grade version of this unit, which is more streamlined and leans heavily on the book *Writing Fiction*.

This unit begins with a few possible ways to collect ideas for historical fiction, with an emphasis on meaning and significance, connected to the time period. The second part of the unit builds on the connection to the time period and historical accuracy while guiding students through developing their story ideas and characters with both imagination and quick research. The third part combines drafting and revising—spending less time on drafting and blurring the line between drafting and revising. One important consideration for this part is that more sophisticated writers need not wait until revision to raise the level of their writing. You can flip any teaching points from prior years from revision up into drafting (or perhaps even developing). For example, as they write on draft paper (or in notebooks while developing), they can pay careful attention to how their leads help their reader connect quickly with the time period and struggles. Work like this does not need to wait. We imagine you will add to this part with those kinds of "Let's get to it early, because I know you can" teaching points. The last part focuses on editing and publishing and relies heavily on your knowledge of what your students need and are ready for in the world of conventions.

## One Possible Sequence of Teaching Points

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### Part One: Collecting Ideas for Historical Fiction—Finding Stories That Are Both Personal and Historical

- “Today I want to teach you that historical fiction writers become researchers and learn as much as we can about a time period that interests us, all the while asking ourselves, ‘What stories are hidden here?’ We might collect writing in our notebooks about daily life, timelines of events during that period, and personal issues and collect photographs and images from that period. We might follow this jotting by exploring possible characters or plots that could exist in what we have learned.”
  - *Tip:* Teachers found that using a time period—or periods—that they *already* studied in social studies greatly supported their students’ work. We also suggest revisiting texts they have already read, now with a new vision toward story creation. You might show them in your lesson how you jot what you are learning (“Sometimes even young boys had to sell things like newspapers during the depression to help their families”) and then use what you know about fiction to gather some characters and/or plots (“Maybe a boy, Zachary, who steals his friend’s newspapers . . .”).
  
- “Today I want to teach you that another way historical fiction writers collect possible historical fiction story ideas is by thinking about the themes and issues that have run through our narratives and non-narratives and looking to see how those themes might play out differently in a different era. For example, I write a lot about the underdog. I can think about, ‘Who could be the underdog in the time period we are studying, and what kind of story could I write that would show this underdog’s overcoming his or her lot in life?’”
  - *Tip:* Some of your writers will collect directly into the genre using past strategies. Others may benefit from collecting a realistic fiction-like blurb and then going back and revising it to match the time period.
  
- “Today I want to teach you that often when historical fiction writers develop characters for our stories, we consider how the time period and plot intersect with the characters’ internal and external traits. We craft characters by considering what issues exist during the time period and then asking, ‘What kind of traits could add tension during this time period?’ As we jot, we mark things we might need to later go back and fact-check. For example: ‘During the Great Depression many people felt nervous and uncertain about the future. Maybe a character who is almost always positive and hopeful would run into challenges. Maybe on the inside that character . . . and on the outside he or she. . . .’”

## Part Two: Developing Your Story—Shaping Historically True Characters and Plots

- “Today I’m going to teach you that historical fiction writers consider the struggles and motivations of our characters, considering both those that are personal and those that come from the historical period. As we develop these, we make sure our characters are realistic and feel true to the time period.”
- “Today I’m going to teach you how historical fiction writers take great care to develop clear and historically accurate settings for our stories. We consider how locations affect characters and plot points. We might try out our characters in many different places as we think about different ways stories can go. We might look back to illustrations or photographs from the time period and imagine how our characters might realistically act within them. We might then rehearse some of this thinking in our notebooks.”
- “Today I want to teach you that historical fiction writers can use story booklets to help plan our stories many different ways. We can take care to make sure that each page of our (4-page) booklet has a clear setting and action that will move each version of our story along.”
  - *Tip:* Your writers might benefit from considering other sophisticated ways to add into their plans. Writers may try two timelines, both a personal and a historical, to notice ways the two intersect. You might have additional planning strategies your students have successfully employed before, which you might want to remind your students to consider.

## Part Three: Drafting and Revision—Crafting a Compelling Historical Fiction Story

- “Today I’m going to teach you that historical fiction writers don’t just draft any old sloppy way. Instead, we keep in mind everything we know about good writing and try to be right inside the time period, experience the events of each scene, and then go to draft while walking in the character’s shoes.”
- “Today I’m going to remind you that you have learned a lot of things from your historical fiction reading work that you can apply to your writing—some of these things are very sophisticated, and you might not have tried them before. For example, many of us have been fascinated by the symbolism that we see in our novels. We’ve lingered over the Star of David in *Number the Stars*, for instance, theorizing about what it means. We can do that same work for our own readers in our own stories. We can think about the

hearts of our stories and then think about objects or settings we can develop and use as symbols.”

- “Today I want to teach you that writers look closely at how other writers give clues about when and where their stories take place. Some writers, for instance, give headings, like ‘Boston, 1776.’ Others include details that help the reader picture the place and locate the setting—details about transportation, about housing, about technology, about food, about clothes. Sometimes the writer may have the narrator simply tell the reader—as the narrator in *The Butterfly* and the narrator in *Rose Blanche* do—that they live in small towns in France and Germany and that a war is on. Writers, you can try several different opening scenes for your story, and then read them to your club members or writing partner and get some feedback from your fellow readers.”
- “Today I want to teach you that historical fiction writers can revise for mood and atmosphere. We’ve noticed that sometimes in the novels or picture books we are reading, we’ll find two scenes that happen in the same location, but the mood is different. In *Rose Blanche*, for instance, in almost every scene, the mood or atmosphere of the town changes. The writer makes the weather get darker—not because it is actually darker, but because things feel darker to Rose. We, too, can experiment with creating an emotional atmosphere as well as giving physical details about the setting. One of the easiest ways to alter an emotional atmosphere is to use the weather—the sun shines and the birds chirp when you want the mood to be happy and carefree. The sky darkens, the clouds get gloomy, the wind whistles when you want it to feel ominous. There are, of course, other ways that we can do this as well.”
- “Writers, today I want to teach you that when you want to refer to historical events that happened before the central moments of your story, you don’t have to write a long novel! Writers insert flashbacks, or they insert what we call a ‘back story,’ by having one character ask a question and another character tell a little story or give a little history. We can do this by inserting small narratives into our stories—little summaries of important events that will help our readers understand the history surrounding the story.”
- “Today I want to remind you that, just as with any other kinds of writing, historical fiction writers are careful to revise endings, making certain they are the kinds of endings our stories deserve. We know that there are different ways the character’s story can end but that the historical context needs to remain true—that usually the historical issue is not fully resolved. Sometimes at the end of a historical fiction story, we see how characters are affected by, or affect, the struggle. They might be a silent witness—or perhaps they take same sort of small

action. Or perhaps they might be a victim and learn something about themselves through their struggle. We want to take all these options into account, perhaps trying out a few different ways our stories can end, before picking our favorite one.”

## **Part Four: Editing and Publishing—Preparing the Historical Fiction Story for Readers**

- “Today I want to teach you that historical fiction writers can read our writing aloud, noting how word choice and punctuation help to set the mood, tone, and content of our pieces. One way to do this might be to pay close attention to the ways characters talk, giving each his or her own rhythm and style and using punctuation to create this sound.”
- “Today I want to teach you that historical fiction writers carefully reread our pieces of writing, looking for the words we chose to use to describe objects, places, or people and then looking back to our research to see if there are more historically specific ways to name them.”
- “Historical fiction writers publish and celebrate in ways that help our readers best get lost in the worlds we create. Sometimes we might include illustrations or photographs within our writing, or we might even enact parts of our story, trying to speak just as people from that time period would.”

### **Option Two: Fantasy Writing**

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Your students have now written narrative at a couple of points across their year, including personal narratives or memoir to start the year, and then, if you are following the sequence of units laid out in this calendar, realistic fiction. It benefits writers enormously to have an opportunity to return to a genre, working once again in that genre—only this time with greater control, using strategies learned earlier with greater finesse. When writers work more than once in a genre, they can progress from doing as they’re told toward using all they know to accomplish their own big goals. It also gives students an opportunity to have even greater control over the significant Common Core State Standards expectations in both reading and writing: having increasing control of narrative writing, while also being more equipped to analyze an author’s craft and structure as readers. We also know that on the NAEP test, one new genre was recently included: fantasy.

The more students return to narrative genres, the more extensive understanding of craft they can control, such as shifting perspective, symbolism and metaphor, atmospheric setting, and development of minor characters. Be sure to look at the students’



prior fiction stories to see what they're ready to learn next, and plan for some differentiated small-group work to support and challenge your diverse writers. Last year teacher after teacher who taught this unit glowed about the high levels of engagement and productivity among their writers. They also saw enormous jumps in their students' craft and independence. There were challenges as well, but you'll be able to tackle those challenges if you expect them—you can almost predict the small groups you'll want to teach to help students with their structure, their character development, and the movement to close their stories.

This unit also offers a nice parallel to the reading unit at this time, where students are in class-wide genre studies in fantasy fiction book clubs. For this round of fiction, you will teach your students that writers consider the stories they've read, through the lens of writers—after all, they'll be reading picture books and chapter books, which will be chock-full of masterly writing craft. It would be a bit much to expect our apprentice writers to mentor themselves wholly to these texts, but they can certainly try some of the craft moves they notice—the description of fantastical worlds, the insertion of magical objects or characters, the use of symbolism to guide the reader toward interpretations, and so forth. Their observations will enrich their book club conversations and help them to look across texts using the lens of *how* writers develop themes, characters, and settings in fantasy.

By partnering this writing unit with the same genre in their reading work, we can provide students many opportunities to carry strengths from one discipline to another. The mind-work of interpretation in book clubs is clearly tied to the work of putting forth a central meaning, not just retelling events, in writing. Then, too, readers will notice moments when they have strong emotional responses to their books. During writing, they can create their own such moments. Of course, this will mean that writers need to read with the eyes of insiders, attending to not only being moved but noticing the craft choices the writer made in order to affect them. All this time, help your writers to think about what the authors know about *writing narratives*, not just the trappings of fantasy.

In many ways, fantasy fiction is one of the most challenging genres we can teach our students. We must remain vigilant to the fact that students can spin out of control in this unit! What makes this unit such a joy to teach is also what makes it a challenge: students love to write fantasy and think of it as the easiest genre to write because they believe (mistakenly) that anything goes. This can result in pieces that are ten and even twenty pages long that read as one long, convoluted summary. Students will throw in magical characters, worlds, even multiple plotlines with armies from warring nations doing battle—almost anything they have ever read or seen in movies will land in the same muddled piece, which can seem to have lost anything we have taught about writing finely crafted narratives. To combat this, you would be wise to move through this unit with your students more in lockstep than most other units.

It is also worth mentioning that if the whole idea of teaching fantasy writing feels a little intimidating and you would feel more secure having a book to guide you, while there is no fantasy book in the *Units of Study* series, there is *Writing*

*Fiction.* Many teachers have found it helpful to use this book as a template for their unit, simply changing some content here and there to more closely match the genre (creating a fantastical setting, as opposed to a realistic setting, would be one such example).

## Before the Unit Begins: Gathering Materials and Assessing What Students Know

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Many teachers have found that if they paired this unit with a reading workshop unit on fantasy reading, it is helpful to launch the reading unit a few days, if not a full week, before launching the writing work. In this way, students are naturally immersed in the genre as readers without having to give over precious writing time to the immersion work.

Whether you opt to go this route or to teach this unit as an unpaired writing unit, you will want to gather up examples of the genre that are accessible to students. This is, of course, important in every unit, but when teaching fantasy it is doubly so. A majority of students' experiences with fantasy come from reading novels and watching movies. This gives students the idea that the only great ideas for fantasy stories are those of the epic variety. The best way we've found to combat this is to offer students lots of experiences with fun and compelling fantasy stories that are more accessible. You will want to gather up armfuls of picture books and short story collections with short, finely crafted fantasy stories with streamlined plots that represent a variety of cultures. These mentor texts, in addition to being invaluable co-teachers in this unit, also support the Common Core State Standards of looking closely at stories from different cultures, as well as highlighting the roles of heroic characters. These mentor texts can then be read in reading workshop with book clubs, read for homework, or listened to when you read them aloud. Some of our favorite fantasy mentor texts include picture books, such as *Merlin and the Dragons*, *Stranger in the Mirror*, *Raising Dragons*, and *The Rain Babies*, as well as short stories from anthologies, such as *Fire and Wings, But That's Another Story*, or *A Glory of Unicorns*.

While you are gathering materials, we will also suggest something that might seem a little bit surprising at first, but it was something we first learned from Jane Yolen—that fantasy writers must be either keen observers of the world or researchers or both. Considering that much of what the fantasy writer writes is make-believe, this seems odd. Yet, when we stop and remember that all fantasy is based in some reality—fantasy landscapes are based on earthly ones, fantasy creatures are based on real ones—it should come as no surprise that Yolen writes, “All the fantasy authors I know own research volumes on wildlife, wildflowers, insects and birds.” You might consider creating a small basket of photographs, geologic guides, nonfiction books on animals and the environment. These will help students to bring some realism into their fantasy—or at least keep their fantasy grounded in the believable (as odd as that sounds). You might also consider other resources, such as baby name books (which help students choose names with

meaning, significance, and history behind them), dictionaries (which can be helpful when looking up the etymology of words), and anything else you can imagine that will help support and inspire your young writers. Another favorite book, and one you will want to have on the shelf with easy access for students and teachers alike, is Gail Carson Levine's *Writing Magic*—a book she has written for children about writing fantasy.

Finally, a few days before you officially launch the unit, you might consider doing a quick writing on-demand fantasy piece. You might say to your students, "Our next unit is going to be fantasy, and I would love to know what you already know about writing fantasy stories. Would you please write a fantasy Small Moment story, including everything you know about writing strong narratives and everything you know about fantasy?" Students will have one period to try this. You can then collect the pieces and look at them with an eye first and foremost for what they know or are approximating in narrative writing. The Narrative Continuum will be an invaluable resource in this work. Secondly, you will want to see what students already know about how fantasy writing should go. Prepared to be shocked! Students often know more than we do about the genre, and many a teacher finds herself furiously revising her unit plans after seeing all that her students already know and can do.

## Part One: Collecting Ideas for Fantasy Fiction—Finding Story Ideas That Have Depth and Significance

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"All fantasy should have a solid base in reality."

SIR MAX BEERBOHM

The above quote comes as a shock to many novice fantasy writers. Isn't fantasy all about making everything up? Anything goes? In fact, most fantasy is allegorical—real life stories and lessons cloaked in fantasy settings, characters, quests, or all of the above. When we teach students to collect ideas for fantasy stories, we do ourselves and our students a favor when we follow two simple guidelines: keep fantasy stories grounded in some way in the real world, and move *quickly* through the collecting section of this unit. Both of these guidelines help keep students' ideas in the realm of bite-sized, approachable possibilities.

With this in mind, almost any ideas that worked with realistic fiction idea gathering can be recast and used in this unit. You might teach students that they can look at their own lives and imagine how events and issues could be turned into fantasy stories. (*Writing Fiction*, Session I, talks about how this can be done with a realistic angle.) A student with a sick parent might create a fantasy story where the hero must go on a quest to find the magical potion to save the ailing queen, for example.

You could teach students to consider settings as another place to develop possible story ideas. These settings can be in our world (what would happen if Bobby was sitting in math class and an elf popped out of his pencil case?), be built upon portals to another world (Bobby opens his backpack to find himself transported into a castle made entirely of school supplies), or be entirely in a fantasy world (Robert lives in a village in a thatched cottage where everyone rides unicorns). Students can then use these settings to imagine possible story ideas and even characters who might inhabit these settings.

Additionally, you might have students revisit their notebooks, particularly their essay work, to see what life ideas matter most to them. Justice, kindness, peace, and other big world ideas and issues can be particularly potent sources of inspiration in an allegorical genre. We can teach students to think of possible fantasy story ideas that could be generated by these passionate topics. For example, if a student is passionate about the environment, she might craft a story idea that revolves around a magical forest that is being pillaged by an evil dragon for its magical plants and is slowly dying. A young peasant girl must slay the dragon in order to spare the forest.

All of these story ideas will be collected as story blurbs—not a list of possible story ideas, but rather a short description of how a story might go, including possible main characters, problem, and possible resolution. We, of course, are fully expecting the ideas students ultimately choose to morph and develop as the writing progresses, but it is essential that students have mostly formed ideas for ways their stories could take shape. It is also worth noting that in the gathering stage, we can often cut some of those epic and novel-length story ideas off at the pass by teaching and conferring into single arc storylines with only one or two main characters and only a couple of obstacles, rather than a never-ending series of obstacles. In other words, when a student wants to write a story about a prince from a nation who might lose his kingdom if he does not go to war with another kingdom, so over twenty years of battles, magicians, and quests, he finally regains his crown—we might instead encourage him to choose one episode from the student’s epic storyline—perhaps simply just the day when the boy won the crown in one moment of magical valor.

Another word of caution here—many students will want to leap with both feet into drafting their stories in their notebooks rather than collecting several ideas to choose from. This can only lead to thin stories, heavy on plot, light on craft and structure, and almost always too exhaustively long to revise. We will want to be strong on this front and encourage students to do what Carl Anderson has said: “Date around a few ideas, before getting married.” The notebook is a great place to explore lots of different ideas before settling in on one.

## **Part Two: Developing Your Story—Shaping Fantastical Yet Believable Characters and Plots**

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After students have collected a good handful of possible fantasy story blurbs, you will want to guide them toward choosing an idea they will want to turn into a draft and

ultimately publish. You might find it simplest to pull out old charts you have from previous units that instruct students in the fine art of choosing a story (or seed) idea. Or you might opt to add to their repertoire of idea-choosing strategies. We might teach students that some fantasy writers choose our story ideas based on the messages we want to send out into the world—ways we would like our readers to live their lives differently. We could also take a completely different tack and teach students that sometimes writers choose our ideas based on what we think is the most compelling—or even just the most fun—to write.

No matter what strategy your students use to choose their ultimate story idea, once they have chosen that idea, you will want them to spend a day or two on developing the other aspects of their stories. For example, they will want to write long about the settings for their stories. They might also want to develop their main characters (or heroes) using some of the strategies they learned in the realistic fiction unit (Sessions III and IV in *Writing Fiction*).

You will then want to herd them along toward planning their story ideas. It cannot be stressed enough how *crucial* it is that students plan but that you keep a keen eye on those plans. This is where many a well-intentioned student's fantasy writing piece has spun out of control. You will want to frequently check in with students while they plan—perhaps moving from table to table checking on every plan—or else have students leave their notebooks out on their desks while they head to gym and you read over each one to ensure that no one has gone too far astray. Teach them, as well, what you consider the qualities of an effective plan, such as an ending and a clear path that leads to that ending, so that students can help each other assess their writing plans.

We recommend that you encourage students to recycle a planning strategy they used with some success earlier in the year: story booklets, timelines, or even a simple story mountain. It is worth noting that buildings that have had a high degree of success with this unit have limited the students to story ideas with two or three well-developed scenes as a way to combat the desire to write complicated narratives that could only be realistically (and not well) handled through summary. You could then give that planning strategy a decidedly fantastical bent by using one of your fantasy mentor texts, such as “Family Monster,” and showing students how, if there's to be magic in a story, it needs to be introduced at the beginning of the story to make it more believable, as well as to help create more tension and suspense in the plot. You might also consider teaching your more advanced writers to do a double-decker plan: one line for plot points, the other line for the deeper meaning or internal storyline, or the learning journey the character is on.

### **Part Three: Drafting and Revising—Crafting a Compelling Fantasy Fiction Story**

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We want students to move rather quickly through drafting and into the revision process, once again with the goal being to keep kids from getting bogged down in

epic story creation. So it is our suggestion that you plan to teach only one or perhaps two drafting minilessons, moving quickly to revision so that students are incorporating the qualities of good writing you are teaching, even as the bulk of them are still in the midst of drafting.

Aside from reminding your students of all the great narrative writing strategies they've learned and used all years by pulling out and referring to past charts and possibly even past writing pieces, you will want to teach students that the best way to write the strongest drafts is to get lost in writing our drafts, much as we get lost in our books that we're reading. Just as we love when our students miss the call for dinner when they're engrossed in a good book, we want them to miss the call to the carpet for the teaching share because they are so lost in the world of the story that they are creating. We can teach them to do this by focusing their imaginations, by closing their eyes and picturing, or else perhaps by storytelling to a partner, directly before they write. We will coach them to imagine all the sights, sounds, even smells that will help make the story they are writing feel as concrete and *real* as possible. They might then, with their story plans beside them, begin to draft—writing one scene at a time.

The possibilities for revision are endless—in part because the students are often so invested in their fantasy stories that they are willing to try more and work harder. There are dizzying teaching opportunities here! You will, of course, want to be a close observer of your students' drafts in order to assess what your students are most ready to learn as well as what they most need to learn. The Narrative Continuum and the Common Core State Standards will be helpful guides in this work.

A favorite revision teaching point for many teachers in this unit is to teach students how to make their readers suspend disbelief. One way to do this is to teach students that the more specific they are in their descriptions about key characters, settings, even objects, the more believable these things become. For example, if a writer wants to talk about a table that begins to float, one way to make that unbelievable concept more believable is to describe it in great and concrete detail, so that "the table floated across the room" becomes "the round cherry wood table with seventeen pieces of gum stuck to its underside suddenly began to vibrate under their fingers. Lyssa watched in shock as her marble composition notebook slid off its shiny surface as it rose one foot—then two feet off the library's sensible linoleum floor."

Another nice bit of teaching toward suspension of disbelief is to teach students that if they are planning to include magic in their stories, they will want to introduce the magic early in the story so that it will not come as a surprise when it appears later. For example, if we plan to have our hero use a magic stone to cast a protective spell, the first time we hear of this stone should not be when the dragon is about to breathe his fiery breath.

Of course, one of the most important revision moves is one you have been teaching all year long—to develop meaning and significance in stories through showing and not telling. We have taught students to stop, identify, and then stretch out the heart of the story—even going as far as to use scissors and tape to elaborate on these crucial moments in stories. However, many students get so lost in the fun of fantasy and all the



magic the genre offers that they can soon get separated from the heart of their stories. We can remind them to show and not tell, to spin it to feel fresh because they are using fantastical elements to do this work. They will, just as in their personal narratives, want to write with a balance of action, thought, dialogue, and setting, letting their stories unfold bit by bit. Additionally we can teach students that they can make settings and objects into symbols for deeper meanings in stories. The magic stone can come to represent the bravery the hero must show, despite her fears. It is tiny, but strong—just as our hero is. The dark night can stand for the fear the hero is grappling with before the dawn comes.

If your students are working in complementary fantasy book clubs in reading workshop, you will want to tap into the relationships your writers have with each other as well as their shared knowledge of the genre. Students can bring drafts for their pieces to book clubs to receive compliments and suggestions. Some teachers even make multiple copies of each piece so that each club member can have a copy of his or her own to annotate or use Post-its to record comments he or she wants to share with the writers. You will no doubt want to teach your students a protocol for reading and commenting on each other's pieces, as well as ways for writers to decide which suggestions they will want to try and which they would rather not.

This work with clubs can lead naturally into work around mentor texts. Clubs might have read a few picture books or short stories together that can serve as mentor texts for revision work. Students may study together in small groups or else as a whole class a variety of craft moves fantasy authors regularly employ. What can they notice about sentence length and variation? When do fantasy authors use longer or shorter sentences? (Hint: Most authors use longer sentences when they are describing things or slowing action down and shorter sentences when there is action.) What do they notice about the author's use of dialogue? How does the author make different characters speak differently? Word choice? Punctuation? Speech habits? How do the fantasy stories they love most tend to start? How do they tend to end? All of these things can be studied and then emulated.

Finally, if you are still wanting to teach more in revision, you might consider referring to books written by adult writers of fantasy for other professional writers. These books, such as *How to Write Science Fiction and Fantasy* by Orson Scott Card, *Alchemy with Words* by Darin Park and Tom Dullemond, and *Writing Science Fiction and Fantasy* by Gardner Dozois, would not be books that would be directly approachable for children, but with an eye for the types of skills you want your students to learn, you can easily modify the strategies discussed within them.

## Part Four: Editing and Publishing—Preparing the Fantasy Story for Readers

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There is a natural bridge in mentor text work from revision to editing. You can guide students to look at mentor texts for editing help as well. You can remind students to attend to the punctuation usage employed in longer sentences (commas, dashes,

colons)—as well as the way fantasy writers will choose to spell words—even made-up words with conventional spelling in mind.

When students move to publishing, you might opt to have students publish their books as picture books—since so much of fantasy writing lends itself nicely to visuals. Some teachers choose this unit to have students create a class anthology of short stories. This is especially apropos if you did a lot of short story work with your students.

No matter how you publish, you will no doubt want to think of a fitting celebration for this unit. In one Brooklyn school, the teachers asked their students to come to their publishing party dressed as one of the characters from their stories. That day the classes were read to by fairies, elves, wizards, and dragons!

## Word Study to Support Writing Workshop

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This is also another good time for kids to develop some “expert” vocabulary. Mysteries are full of words such as *perpetrator*, *investigator*, *red herring*. Historical fiction will be full of historical terms such as *hearth*, *homestead*, *pinafore*. Fantasy often has archaic, medieval words such as *saddlebags*, *abode*. Additionally, for your fantasy writers, you might teach them that many fantasy authors use some Latin or Greek words or other forms of etymology to create new words for the creations of their imagination. Your writers can also create individual and shared word banks of the technical words they are collecting as they read, and they can weave these into their writing.

## Additional Resources

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### *Developing Understanding of the Genre*

Last year, some teachers were able to plan their reading and writing units in such a way that they could begin their reading work in fantasy a week before their writing work, helping children to gain a sense of the genre before they began to write. Another option would be to read aloud several short fantasy texts during the first week of the unit so that students have experience with a handful of full stories. Some of our favorites mentioned earlier in this write-up include “Family Monster” from the short story anthology *But That’s Another Story* and the picture books *Merlin and the Dragons* and *Mufaro’s Beautiful Daughters*. Additionally, you might choose to have students read from picture books or short story anthologies as part of their book club work in reading workshop during that first week in the unit. Finally, for a very quick way to get a sense of the genre, some teachers have shown short clips of fantasy films. The best clips tend to be older films that students are unlikely to have seen before so they do not have preconceived ideas about what makes this film fantasy. Some of our favorites include *Willow*, *The Princess Bride*, and *The Dark Crystal*. In just

five minutes of close observation, students are able to gather a lot of information that will help build their understandings of the genre.

### *Using Assessment*

Many teachers have found that it is extremely helpful to begin the unit with a quick on-demand assessment to ascertain what students already know about narrative writing in general and fantasy stories in particular. You might want to say, “I’d like to see how much you already know about writing fantasy stories before we start our next unit. Would you write a short fantasy story or scene during our writing time today?” After the pieces are collected, you can use them to help tailor the unit so that you are not reteaching topics students have already mastered and so you spend additional time on topics where more instruction is needed.

### *Modifying the Start of This Unit*

If you feel that your students are advanced writers and you are very comfortable with a unit of study on fantasy short fiction, you might opt to teach all three ways to begin collecting ideas for fantasy stories and allow the students to choose the path that works best for them. If that feels unwieldy, or you simply feel your students are not ready for those choices, you might choose to start with any one of the following teaching points and then move forward from there, showing how the other strategies can be used to develop a story idea once it has been chosen.

## **One Possible Sequence of Teaching Points**

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### **Part One: Collecting Ideas for Fantasy Fiction—Finding Story Ideas That Have Depth and Significance**

- “One way fantasy writers get ideas for stories, as strange as it might sound, is by studying our own lives. We can reread our writer’s notebooks, think about issues that matter to us or simply moments in our lives, and then reimagine these things as fantasy story ideas. We can turn our fear of the dark into a story about a brave peasant boy who lives in a world of darkness and must learn to cast a spell to bring back the sun.”
- *Possible mid-workshop teaching point:* “Another way that writers might begin collecting ideas for fantasy is by thinking about possible plots, or quests. We can use a lot of what we know from writing realistic fiction and create story blurbs that include some of what we already know and are changed just a bit to reflect the nature of a story based on a quest: ‘Somebody had to . . . because . . . but . . . so . . . yay!’”

- “Writers can begin collecting ideas for fantasy stories by thinking about characters—using all the strategies they know about developing characters from other kinds of fiction (internal, external, motivations, and so on). Since the main character in fantasy is a hero, it is often tempting to make the character perfect, but just like in realistic fiction, the best characters need to feel ‘real’ with flaws, weaknesses, and strengths, and the writer must develop the character knowing that she or he will change by the end of the quest.”
- *Possible mid-workshop teaching point:* “From reading fantasy, we’ve learned that fantasies have very purposeful settings. We know that settings can be magical or nonmagical, or the setting can begin in our world and the characters can move into a magical world. Today I want to teach you that if you want to begin, or end up, in a magical place, you can imagine that setting as if it were our world and all that it entails, but *different* somehow. You can play a mind game of ‘what if?’ to help your imagination get going.”

## **Part Two: Developing Your Story—Shaping Fantastical Yet Believable Characters and Plots**

- “Writers are powerful. We have the power to change the people who read our stories. When we choose a story idea, we want to choose an idea that has the potential to change the way a reader thinks, feels, or acts. Once we’ve chosen that idea, we need to take the seed that we began with and set about developing the other elements of the story. If we chose a seed from character development, we still need to develop setting and plot. If we chose plot, we’ll need to develop character and setting. Use the same strategies from the last few days to develop what you need to.”
- *Possible mid-workshop teaching point:* “Writers can develop setting by visualizing the place and thinking about how the place affects the character. To do this, you might consider sketching out a map of your world, the way C. S. Lewis did with Narnia or Tolkien did with Middle Earth.”
- “Today I want to teach you that writers plan our stories in a way that works best for us. We have already learned several ways to plan this year: timelines, story booklets, story mountains, and more. When you go off to write today, think of the planning method that will help you do your best writing work.”

## **Part Three: Drafting and Revising—Crafting a Compelling Fantasy Fiction Story**

- “As the famous poet Robert Frost once said, ‘No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader. No surprise in the writer, no surprise in the reader.’ For a fantasy

writer to write a convincing fantasy story, he or she must first get lost in that story. Today I want to teach you that one of the best ways for writers to begin drafting fantasy stories is to close our eyes and allow ourselves to get lost in the stories we are about to write, let our imaginations picture every little thing we are about to draft on paper, and then begin to write. We know that as we draft, we want to get lost in the stories of our own imaginations, much the way we get lost in the stories we read in reading workshop. When the writer gets lost in his or her own story, it is more likely the reader will get lost in it.”

- “Today I want to teach you that fantasy writers draft knowing that they are going to have to do a little convincing to get their readers to suspend disbelief and make a world that rings true. One of the ways to do this is to make the world of the story as realistic-feeling as possible, even if the ideas are completely unrealistic. We can study the writers we’ve been reading and notice how one of the strategies they use is to use as much specificity as possible. For example, it’s not just a piece of paper but a piece of parchment rolled into a scroll and wound tight with twine.”
- “Today I want to teach you that another way to be sure to suspend disbelief for our readers is to make sure that anything magical that is important to the story is introduced fairly early on so that the readers are not taken by surprise when that element is used. In other words, if the prince is going to be rescued from the giant by a magic shoe, the magic shoe needs to have been shown earlier in the story.”
- “Today I want to teach you that it is important in every story that the writer stays in the moment whenever possible, by writing in scenes with action, thoughts, and dialogue, not just writing in summary. This is even more crucial in fantasy because so much of the story comes from the writer’s imagination, so nothing can be taken for granted. Something as simple as a table, which in realistic fiction people could completely understand, needs to be described if it is important or different. Is the table actually a magical creature? Is it made from a sacred wood? Does it talk? These are things the reader needs to be shown—not just told.”
- “Today I want to teach you that some very big work in fantasy is knowing how to grapple with passage of time, in other words, when we need to write in the moment, or in scene, and when it makes sense to write in summary. In general, important plot points should be written in scenes, and swaths of time that move us from one plot point to the next can be told in summary. It often helps to look at mentor authors to see how they accomplish this.”

## Part Four: Editing and Publishing—Preparing the Fantasy Story for Readers

- “Today I want to teach you that in addition to doing the usual fixing up to make sure that everything in our writing is correct, we can also edit for craft. One thing we might consider is cadence—how different speakers will have a different rhythm to the way that they speak. For example, the rhythm of the king’s speech will probably be different than a peasant’s. We can show that difference in cadence by using different kinds of punctuation.”
- “Today I want to teach you that fantasy stories have a very identifiable sound and language. The vocabulary in particular can really stand out. For example, instead of a singer, we might find a minstrel. Instead of a meal, there might be a feast. When writing fantasy stories, we want to be sure to use fantasy-type vocabulary throughout the story, not just at the beginning. Also, if there are no words that already exist for creatures, places, and things in our stories, we might need to create our own language and make sure it’s consistent throughout the story.”
- “Today I want to teach you that when fantasy writers are editing, we want to pay special attention to spelling—after all, nothing pulls a reader out of a story faster than a misspelled word. We want to make sure all our spelling is correct, and we also want to make sure that even words we make up are spelled according to conventional rules. Long vowel sounds should be spelled the way we would expect them to be spelled, for example.”
- *Publishing with an audience in mind:* “When writers have completed all the hard work of finishing their pieces, they know they have one last step—to publish their pieces. Fantasy writers take special care to fancy up their writing so that it reflects the hard work they have put into the pieces.”





## UNIT SIX

# Poetry

FEBRUARY/MARCH

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A poetry unit is an exciting time in the writing workshop. Perhaps no other genre grants young writers quite the same freedom to experiment with physical space on the page, to savor the sound of the words they are writing and think of them as drumbeats, and, above all, to make universal meaning out of close observations, thoughts, and questions about the world and personal experience. We are suggesting that for fifth graders this year, your poetry unit could allow for all this but also place an emphasis on collecting poems around a particular theme or topic, as a way to prompt for volume of writing and for depth of thinking and as another opportunity for children to experiment with different points of view.

This kind of work is likely to be more complex than writing separate poems that do not connect, according to Webb's "Depth of Knowledge." In looking closely at mentor anthologies that include poems from different speakers' points of view, your students will also be practicing fifth-grade level Common Core reading skills. If your students seem mostly brand-new to poetry (although this is unlikely given that it will have been taught in prior years), or if you'd like to focus more on language development and wordplay, you may wish to turn to the third-grade poetry write-up (Unit 9 in the third-grade 2010–2011 Writing Curricular Calendar).

This unit of study can usher your children into a new world of meaning making: a world that fosters deep connections between reading and writing and a commitment to repeated revision. This unit offers a unique opportunity to zoom in on craft—from both the reader's and the writer's perspective. For although poets write to find and communicate meaning, just like any other author, they also regularly "shift attention from the *what* (subject/meaning) to the *how* (language)." Ralph Fletcher recommends

this shift in his new book *Pyrotechnics on the Page: Playful Craft That Sparks Writing*, and he's not alone. The Common Core State Standards also expect that our young readers develop their understanding and appreciation of not just *what* the author of a text is saying but *how* that text gets that meaning across. As your kids try out multiple poems on a chosen topic or theme, they will have a chance to experience first-hand how differently crafted texts can offer truly different takes on the same subject.

In this unit, you'll invite children to write poems in response to the topics and themes that surround them: poems about finding and losing friends, the power of sports to heal and to devastate. You'll teach children to find the poems that are hiding in the details of their lives. You'll do all this not just because poetry is its own powerful genre but also because the habits they develop as poets—specificity, comparative thinking, understatement, and hyperbole—will serve them well in any genre of writing. It's also true that an understanding of poetry from the inside out will help them build a lasting mental framework for how poetry works and will support their ability to read poetry with comprehension and craft appreciation, skills which are expected according to the Common Core State Standards as well as the NAEP.

Watch out for pleasant surprises from your English Language Learners this month. This genre is relatively flexible in terms of grammar, and poems are often shorter in length and volume than prose. This can make poetry feel more accessible to ELL writers, especially if they have an internalized sense of rhythm and meter from being exposed to the richness of a poetic tradition in their *primary* language. Also, this genre borrows from intelligences other than linguistic. Since poetry requires a sense of rhythm and since poems can have a lyrical quality, this genre may tap into a writer's *musical* intelligence, too, just as the sense of balance, precision, and symmetry in some poetic forms will alert a writer's *mathematical* sensibility. Expect that your children will bring their own voice and style to the poems that will be created in your room this month—and be ready to celebrate this voice or style when you see it.

## Gathering Resources

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To start off the month, you'll want to create an environment where children read, hear, and speak poetry. Perhaps you make fresh, new baskets of new poems, poetry books, and collections in your classroom library. Or you might recruit the school librarian to add his or her expertise by generating opportunities for students to find, read, and reread poems they love. If you are taking up our suggestion to ask children to publish anthologies, you will need to have many examples of different kinds of anthologies on hand. The public library is a great resource for this, since these are books that can stay in your classroom throughout the unit. Try to find anthologies that are focused on a common topic or theme, which may even be around a science subject, such as *Fine Feathered Friends* by Jane Yolen (Yolen has written many anthologies that focus on a specific element in nature), or a social studies subject, such as *Roots and Blues: A Celebration* by Arnold Adoff or *If You're Not Here, Please Raise Your Hand: Poems about*

*School* by Kalli Dakos. If you do not have many of these, it's easy to create a few folders of related poems—of course you could also enlist kids to help you with this. If you are also teaching the text set unit in reading workshop, this should feel like very similar work!

If you teach in a Spanish-English bilingual classroom, or if you have many Spanish-speaking students, you may want to include some Spanish-English anthologies, as there are many lovely examples of these: *The Tree Is Older Than You Are: A Bilingual Gathering of Poems and Stories from Mexico with Paintings by Mexican Artists*, edited by Naomi Shihab Nye, and *Laughing Tomatoes: And Other Spring Poems/Jitomates Risuenos: Y Otros Poemas de Primavera*, by Francisco X. Alarcon. You may want to explore the Poetry Foundation, [www.poetryfoundation.org](http://www.poetryfoundation.org), an independent literary organization. This site has a children's poetry section, including children's poet laureates. A more extensive list for poetry resources also exists on the TCRWP website.

When designing this unit, *you* might need to call on some inspiration and mentors, too! You can draw upon professional books, including *Awakening the Heart: Exploring Poetry in Elementary and Middle School* and *The Revision Toolbox: Teaching Techniques That Work*, by Georgia Heard; *A Note Slipped under the Door: Teaching from Poems We Love*, by Nick Flynn and Shirley McPhillips; *Handbook of Poetic Forms*, edited by Ron Padgett; *Wham! It's a Poetry Jam: Discovering Performance Poetry*, by Sara Holbrook; *A Kick in the Head: An Everyday Guide to Poetic Forms*, edited by Paul B. Janeczko; and *Getting the Knack: 20 Poetry Writing Exercises*, by Stephen Dunning and William Stafford. Visit our website to find a list of other professional texts you might consider using.

## The Plan for the Unit

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From the start of this unit, you will want to develop and articulate a clear vision of how your fifth graders will publish. Where and for whom and in what format will they publish their poetry? How will they celebrate? This will, in part, be based on what you discover after conducting an on-demand assessment; your decision will also be based on what's realistic for the time you have carved out, for the access to materials and to publishing/performance space. Set a realistic deadline, and expect that, whatever the format of publication, every child will draft, revise, and edit several poems, using mentor texts and your lessons as guides through this process. It's likely that you will think of this as a three-week rather than a four-week unit, giving more time either to genre fiction, which comes before, or to literary essay and test prep, which follow this unit.

Immersion will play a larger role in this unit than in other writing units, from the very start of the unit and all the way through. Because you will want to teach your kids to be able to read poems well and thoughtfully in addition to teaching them how to use those poems as mentors, you will want to pick some touchstones that serve both purposes well. Take this opportunity, too, to teach into the work of the

Common Core State Standards in reading, which ask for fifth graders to consider the speaker's point of view in poetry and to notice how the speaker reflects on the topic or theme of the poem.

As with any writing unit, writing with volume and stamina remains a central goal. This can feel uniquely challenging during a poetry unit of study. One solution is to launch this unit by spending several days creating a class anthology around a common theme and, in this way, demonstrate how many different perspectives poetry can take on, even when working within the same general topic. This will then set the tone for how the students' own work will go: not in a random, poems-coming-out-of-nowhere kind of way, but instead with a mission to explore a topic from a number of points of view through different kinds of poetry.

You will then spend a few more days in more typical collecting work but with kids both gathering ideas for anthologies and trying out some poems to go with those topics. A day or two will be needed to then teach them how to select poems for an anthology and how to revise toward the bigger theme, perhaps writing new poems in the voice of different relevant characters, real or imagined, to fill in themes or moods that are not yet there. The continued use of published poems as mentors during five or six days of revision will help maintain a sense of exploration and inspiration as your young poets strive to mimic the work of their poetry heroes.

You will want to spend some days at the end of the unit preparing for publication: whether this may mean creating illustrations to go with the central images of the poems they've written or rehearsing performances to practice how they will deliver their poetry so that the meaning is clear to the audience, this will be a critical time. It's especially important that you teach into this a bit, as these activities can be low-level according to Webb's "Depth of Knowledge" (if they simply make drawings for the sake of sprucing up an anthology) or high-level (if you teach them to consider how visuals can either support the tone of the poem or offer another lens; how the decision of which poems to place next to each other can change the way the reader will approach each poem).

## On-Demand in Poetry

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Other units often begin with an on-demand, which allows students to show what they know about writing in a specific genre. Poetry need not be an exception. From their shared reading of poems and songs to poetry units in writing workshop, your students bring a diverse knowledge of poetry with them into the classroom. As with any on-demand, you will want to assess what your kids know so you can tailor the unit and be responsive in your teaching. You might gather your students close and say, "Writers, we are about to make an important shift in our writing lives. We are about to move from being essay writers to being . . . poets! As poets, we are going to see and think and write differently because poets notice what other people miss, poets see the world with wide awake eyes. So when I walked into our room this

morning, I looked with my poet's eyes and I realized that we have an emergency right here, right now in this room. We need poems! And not just any poems! We need the poems that only you can write. So let's take today's writing workshop to fill our room with our poems." You may want to provide paper choice for your writers—long and narrow, short and fat, with lines, without lines. You might also want to provide colored pencils so that after drafting, writers can make their poems beautiful. When studying these on-demand poems, you will want to notice, above all else, meaning—what is the message the writer is trying to convey?

## Part One: Creating a Class Anthology as a Jump-Start to the Unit

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If you are taking on the anthology project, you may begin this unit in a new way: with the invitation to create a quick class anthology around a topic of common interest, all in a few days of quick drafting and revision. You can read aloud *This Is Just to Say: Poems of Apology and Forgiveness* by Joyce Kilmer. In this book, Kilmer creates a fictitious class of sixth graders who, upon hearing the poem "This Is Just to Say" by William Carlos Williams, write their own poems of apology and forgiveness, creating a class anthology. After reading a few selected poems from the book, you might say, "We could try something just like this!" Again, this work needs to feel fast, furious, and full of purpose. As a class you will quickly collect some possible topics, themes, or ideas for the class anthology, in part because when later your poets write their own anthologies, you will want the themes of these anthologies to feel deliberate and intentional. One teacher shared that one of her students chose the theme of being retained in fifth grade. His anthology included poems called "Going to 5<sup>th</sup> Grade . . . Again," "Mother's Disappointment," and "Making New Friends."

You might show how a topic might have several embedded themes: baseball, for example, might include the themes of "It's hard to let your team down," and "Practice makes perfect," and "Sometimes no matter how hard you try, you still don't win." (This will support and build on the similar work that is happening in reading workshop if you are teaching an interpretive text set unit simultaneously, as you will be coaching your class into coming up with multiple themes inside a single text and finding multiple texts that speak to similar themes.) Then enlist students to write poems that get at these different themes. You'll need to spend a little time coming to consensus around a topic and then make sure children all have picked themes or messages that they actually want to try out—it doesn't matter if there is overlap: more than one writer can take up the same theme! The point of this work is to have kids practice using poetry to get across a meaning—they will quickly move to generating poetry, which then will bring them to new meanings to hone through revision.

In demonstration teaching, you will take on one of the themes for the purpose of modeling and remind kids by tucking in tips that a poem has line breaks, that poems zoom in on small moments and vivid images, and that even in these first tries they may be trying to do these things.

Surround your writers with mentor texts, not just by lining the bookshelves with popular anthologies but by displaying poems around the room—perhaps even having a Poem of the Day display that keeps changing. Mid-workshops would be well spent delving into some of these texts and sharing how two very different poems about the same topic (for example, “Dreams” by Langston Hughes and “Listen to the Mustn’ts” by Shel Silverstein) get at different sides of that topic. (Hughes’ poem is dark and suggests that without our imaginations, we are lost; Silverstein is more hopeful, letting the reader know that dreaming is always possible, even when others are naysayers.) You can teach students to consider who the speaker might be in each of these poems and what we can tell about the speaker from his or her ideas that come through in the poem. It’s also a good time to teach students that the poet and the speaker may or may not be the same person: that poets can take on the voice or “persona” of someone else. Invite them to try this in their own poems as well.

## **Part Two: Generating Ideas for Anthologies, Collecting Poems through Immersion, and Living Like a Poet**

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Now your students will need support in coming up with topics for their anthologies and for generating possible poems to explore different perspectives on those topics. The generating process is as diverse as poetry itself. Poems can grow out of observations or emotions, out of memories and images, or from a clever turn of phrase that is borrowed, overheard, or invented out of the blue. Poems may grow out of, or respond to, other poems. They may grow out of a story or stem from the writer’s concern about an issue or the need to make a difference. You’ll want to teach writers how to use their notebooks as a place to begin collecting ideas for their poems.

Continue to look at poems together and to give your kids time to wander in the poetry books and collections of poems that are in your room. Often, reading poetry in a partnership (where the partners first read the poem aloud, then reread silently, then discuss) can spark conversations that will then lead to fast and furious writing of original poems. You may model how a mentor poem can lead to a poem that is about the same topic, a poem that follows the same structure, or a poem that talks back to the original poem.

You will want to select a variety of poems to share with the whole class so that you do not reinforce your kids’ ideas that poetry has to look or sound a certain way. If you are teaching toward anthologies, choose a selection of poems from a couple of anthologies that showcase different effects that a group of poems can have: for example, a Jack Prelutsky book may include poems loosely connected by the humor in them, whereas Lee Bennett Hopkins’ baseball collection has a more explicit topical connection with more diversity of emotion and style. In addition to these touchstones, of course, you will need to be armed with a much broader selection of poetry, in the form of poetry books or folders of poetry that students have access to for independent reading and apprenticeship.



Combing through *previous* notebook entries might evoke inspiration. “Flipping through the pages of our previous writing might lead us to poems that are hiding in the words waiting to be written,” you might say, urging your young poets to pry previous notebook entries apart with a pencil to circle or copy out a line or a paragraph that they might turn into a poem. You will remind them that writers return to the same themes again and again, and perusing old entries with this lens should allow for some “aha” moments and ideas for new work: “I’m always disappointed in my brother. Maybe I could write an anthology with poems that get at all the ways that I’m feeling about him, to see if I can come up with more than those disappointed feelings.”

Looking at images or going on observation walks (nature walks, community walks, building walks) with notebook and pen in hand is another way for children to observe and to imagine what they might write about. Teach them to first write long about what they see, what they notice, and what this makes them think. Above all, you will try to teach—and model—a thoughtfulness and a wakefulness that are essential to getting a poem going. Nothing you say need be very poetic or profound as long as you uninhibitedly model a sense of being alert to the visual details around you. Just as some poems originate in ideas and images, some begin, quite literally, with words. A catchy phrase or a lyrical line can play in a poet’s head and eventually spur a bigger binding idea.

Many teachers have found success in starting a poetry unit by bringing in song lyrics and inviting children to bring in the (appropriate) lyrics to music they are obsessed with. This is a way to notice how songs actually are poems (including line breaks, repetition, figurative language, and rhyme schemes) and also a way to use lines in songs to inspire new writing off from the same theme or image. You might share a pair of mismatched love songs as a way to show how different songwriters angle their work to give different meanings (“Love Hurts” and “Love Is All You Need,” for example).

You will expect your writers, after a day or two of generating or collecting, to end up with lots of small blurbs and/or first tries, all waiting to become more well-crafted poems. Often, these kinds of gathering entries may not start out looking like poems, instead taking the shape of small paragraphs, perhaps like story blurbs from narrative collecting or small patches of thought as during essay writing. This is fine—and to be expected. These entries are initial fodder for powerful poems, and they will not arrive in their final and perfected form. It’s also fine if your children are using line breaks and creating entries that do look poetic right away. What is important is that children learn to generate ideas that have power and resonance for them.

During the generating stage, you will most likely introduce a few strategies for first-try poetry, then in a mid-workshop or share, you might quickly show how poets don’t wait for revision, that any first try is open for rethinking and reworking. You may then choose to teach a generating lesson that shows how a first try can spawn new thinking that leads to the writing of a whole new poem—not just changing a word here and there—a new poem that offers a slightly different perspective perhaps on the same topic. In this way you will be continuing to support an important trend in your writing workshop: writing with volume, which in poetry probably means writing lots of poems and lots of versions of poems, rather than writing long poems.

A mid-workshop or a share during these first couple of days could already introduce the idea of on-the-run revision in poetry. Poets don't wait until it's "revision" time to rethink and recraft something they're working on. It's always revision time in poetry. Right away, I can look at the lines I just wrote about a fight I had with my brother:

He was so mad  
he threw a shoe  
into the basement wall.  
I was scared of his anger  
as usual.

And we can try to quickly add an image from the setting or a detail about an object or piece of clothing that will make this poem more piercing. We can especially look for a surprising detail or one that adds a new emotion to the poem. You might remind children of how, in personal narrative, in fiction, in information writing—in every kind of writing—they worked on bringing in important details. Poetry is no different. So I might close my eyes and picture the hole in the wall in our basement and add some lines:

He was so mad  
he threw a shoe  
into the basement wall.  
The shoe thumped to the ground,  
leaving a hole, ragged and dark  
between my brother and me.

You might also suggest to them that as the unit progresses, they can still go back and collect more entries, living their lives with the wide-open eyes of poets. They will need to, as their ideas for their anthologies start to shift. If I'm writing about the troubles of having a brother, I might realize I need a poem from his perspective or maybe from my mom's perspective (or even the wall's perspective!), and I'll have to write those.

## Part Three: Poets Get Strong Drafts Going and Revise All Along

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### *Structuring More Purposeful Drafts: Turning Entries into Poems with Line Breaks and Stanzas*

Early on, you might also encourage children to talk with a partner and to write reflectively about the entries they have collected in their notebooks. Children may reflect by writing or saying, "I'm writing about this because . . ." or "I want my reader to feel or think . . ." or "One thing that may be missing here is. . ." This work helps children to uncover the deeper meaning in their entries and to begin to plan for a collection of poems that shows different sides of their chosen topic or theme.

Now that students have several short entries, chock-full of meaningful moments, observations, and ideas, you can invite them to draft these more formally and to experiment with the craft of poets. You will probably emphasize free verse poetry at the beginning. Rhyming well is a precise skill that many adult poets find difficult to master! Teach children to aim first for meaning and for finding a way to describe what matters with words that will make the reader see the world in a brand-new way. You will want to teach students how to draft the bare-bones, the preliminary sketch, of a poem out of the ideas they've generated.

Model how this might be done, especially for students who tend to capture or generate ideas in prose, or help students mold poems out of previous notebook entries, which will, of course, be in prose. "Poets know how to turn prose into poetry," you might say, showing them that they can discover rhythm in the sentences they've jotted by breaking them up. For example, you may put one of the blurbs you wrote up on chart paper or document camera and read it aloud:

I was running in the park with my friends, and we were all running together at first. But because I had allergies, I had trouble keeping up with them. Soon I was all by myself, watching my friends run farther away from me. I felt so weak and alone.

"This is not a poem," you'll tell kids. "But I can find the rhythm in these words and convert it *into* a poem. I can do this by breaking this prose into lines. When I take a sentence and break it into lines, poets call those places 'line breaks.' I can mark the spots with a little slash. I know from the poems I looked at that sometimes line breaks happen at end punctuation, sometimes they happen at important words, and sometimes they just happen when it would sound good to pause. I'm going to add a few and then ask you and your partner to help me." You might turn back to the chart and begin adding, all the while thinking out loud: "'I was running in the park . . .'—that sounds like a good line, so I'll break there."

I was running in the park/ with my friends,/ and we were all running together at first./ But because I had allergies,/ I had trouble keeping up with them.

You could then ask students to help you add other line breaks into your poem. Next, show your class how you can quickly rewrite a draft of your poem, going to a new line at each slash mark:

I was running in the park  
with my friends  
and we were all running together at first.  
But because I had allergies,  
I had trouble keeping up with them.

You will decide which kinds of work to demonstrate for your whole class that will make for good small-group or individual conferences and what order feels most appropriate. Beginning with more structural changes from their prose pieces to their poems will help students very quickly see their potential as “poets.” Experimenting with making lines and stanzas will quickly create the visual look of a poem. Mention how poets often do not write out full and complete sentences but eliminate extra words and get right to the important stuff.

Instead of:     *I was running in the park with my friends.*  
try:             *Running in the park*  
                    *with friends.*

Instead of stressing the technical differences between metaphor and simile, at this point you might teach them how to make meaningful comparisons by placing an ordinary thing up next to something it’s never been compared to before: “The grass in the park was soft and green, like my stuffed frog that I slept with when I was a baby.” You might tuck in the term “simile” here, noting that you have used a comparison and used the word *like*, but the usefulness of this skill and some ways to practice it well are what you will highlight.

You might also introduce the idea of meter. The CCSS mentions “verse,” “rhythm,” and “meter” as terms that fifth graders should be able to understand and use. While the first two terms are probably already familiar (though you will want to check on this, and with ELLs this will not be so), meter, or the number of beats/syllables in a given line plus the pattern of those syllables, is likely a new or still shaky concept. Again, the point will be to teach your kids how considering the syllables in lines gives poets more control over the reader’s pacing. In your model poem, you might show how more syllables in a line can give a breathless, fast-paced feeling, so you might choose that for a line that has a lot of action or where there is a rushed feeling:

I was running through the park with all my friends, all of us together, running fast.

But you might add more frequent line breaks and end up with shorter lines with fewer syllables in a part of the poem that is quieter or where you want the reader to go slower:

My breathing got harder and  
I started to fall  
behind.  
Soon I was  
alone.

## Part Four: Poets Revise to Clarify Meaning and to Create Anthologies with a Range of Perspectives

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Once children have a few strong drafts going, you'll want to teach them poetic techniques for revision and craft moves to amplify the messages in their poems (and support Common Core requirements for understanding poetic terminology). You will want to maintain a balance between the spirit of playfulness that makes poetry such a winner in the classroom and the intensity of trying to make a piece of writing actually get better, actually become more meaningful through craft. These endeavors are not as contradictory as they seem, and if you put up student work consistently to demonstrate how poems not only change but actually get better through revision, you will get buy-in from your young writers.

Mid-workshops can certainly teach your poets how to take revision across the poems in their anthology. For example, if they are working on tone and word choice, that's work for not just one but all of their poems. And since they are trying to create a range of perspectives and tones for their collections, it will be good work to use the same or similar strategies toward different goals. If in one poem I'm trying to find as many harsh words as possible to get across how abrasive my brother's anger can be (*he cracked his G.I. Joe against the Jeep*), in a different poem, when I'm remembering him as the little kid I used to protect, I can be searching for soft-sounding words instead (*his hair swirled in ringlets in the playground breeze*).

Remind them of revision strategies they *already know* from their earlier narrative and even essay units. For example, they could try out starting right in the moment, instead of trying to summarize everything about their subject. They could try being more precise about their choice of words. While poetry is yet another form of writing, it is still *writing* and your year is built upon spiraling skills to help students to become more independent with the choices they make as writers, to tap the potential of poetry to deepen the work they have been developing all year.

The revision strategies you might teach your young poets are limitless. These "revisions" will often be specific craft moves such as whittling away excess words, being deliberate about tone and mood, and inserting figurative language. The list is long and you will choose what you might fit comfortably into your instruction in this month. You will want to draft a poem or two of your very own in front of the class and use these as the models on which to demonstrate each revision strategy. In each case, aim that children see clearly what you did and how they might do the same and also that this move made the poem visibly better.

For example, some of your revision lessons could consider multiple titles, how they can often enhance the meaning of a poem by adding more to the ideas, by being more literal than the rest of the poem, or even by setting up readers to expect one thing and then become surprised when the poem itself goes in a totally new direction.

As readers of poems, your students no doubt have already learned how endings play a huge role in the poem's meaning—they can now put equally as much care into the construction of their own. They may reread their poem and decide on either

a fitting last line or a last line that turns the tables on the rest of the poem. After the poem about the fight with my brother, I could end with a line that goes with the rest of the poem:

He was so mad  
he threw a shoe  
into the basement wall.  
The shoe thumped to the ground,  
leaving a hole, ragged and dark  
between my brother and me.  
That hole is always there now, between us.

Or I could think: what's a surprising idea about my brother and his anger? Maybe an idea that's more risky, that I don't like to admit? And then I could instead end with:

I'm so glad he threw that shoe  
so I didn't have to.

Partner work will be important to keep up the energy during revision because you can have partners helping each other by giving feedback and even recommending next steps. A poet who has written about the loss of her dog in a story poem, for example, might read to a partner and the partner might say, "Is there an image of your dog that comes back to you over and over? You could try finding that image and repeating it." Partners can also notice where there may be holes in a poet's plan for an anthology. In an anthology about school, a partner might note that all the poems seem to be from girls' perspectives—couldn't the poet try a poem in the voice of a boy? In other words, partners can coach each other to try out the teaching you've already done.

As students meet with their partners to read and revise their collections of poetry, you will want to urge them to play with punctuation. They might refer to inquiry charts on punctuation. You will want students to challenge one another on the true meaning of their poems. If they want the mood of the poem to be sad, they might decide that it is best to have fewer exclamation points (saying, for example, "Exclamation points make everything sound upbeat and exciting—they won't fit here") and more periods and perhaps a dash to show long pauses. Students might plan to use commas to break apart a list of things or to add more detail-supplying words to their lines: *The bright, yellow leaf died as it drifted, softly, quietly to the ground.*

Teach your students that poets convey messages through sounds and through imagery. Teachers in previous years have sometimes categorized their revision strategies in these ways, both in their instruction and on charts posted in the room. Children can try to create *sounds* in their poem to further express their thoughts and feelings, how their lines could have rhymes between them or even within them. You might show them published poets who are really skilled at rhyming, like Jack



Prelutsky, and teach your students that rhyme is a choice, not a requirement, of poetry, as is deciding which words to rhyme.

Other sounds are important, too. You might go back to one of your own mentor texts that you read aloud and look again with your class at how long vowel sounds can have a very different effect than short, choppy, hard consonant sounds. They might also revise for the sounds of their poems by looking again at the choices they are making with repetition. Your young poets will hardly be able to contain the urge to read their poems aloud, and partners can help a great deal in this—either listening or, better yet, reading the poem back to the poet to see if the words he or she wrote make a poem sound the way the poet hoped for.

Poets also convey their ideas visually, and children can revise to decide how long or short their lines are on the page; if there are stanzas or not and how many; which words are capitalized; and what kinds of punctuation to use. They will learn how poets use the “white space” around the words to pause, take a breath, and make something stand out from all the other words.

Revision is a perfect time, if you choose, to look at a few standard forms of poetry. It is probably not necessary (or wise) to attempt to teach every form, nor is it even necessary to teach *any* unless you feel that both you and your students will benefit and be interested. Once students have lived with their entries for quite a while and have worked on many different permutations of them, have mined them for meaning, if you invite them to experiment with how, say, a haiku or pantoum might enhance what they are trying to say, they can feel really powerful and now purposeful. Choosing to work on form near the end of the unit, not the beginning, means that students are making *choices* versus simply filling in blanks just to get the right number of syllables. For instance, the entry about the hole in the wall might work as a haiku, with the last line delivering a change-up, now that you understand what you are really trying to say:

His anger still shrieks:  
“I threw the shoe at the wall,  
but it’s all your fault.”

You might also return to the concept of meter here, or at least to the related concept of syllabification, and invite students to make up their own forms by controlling their line breaks based on a syllable count they invent. Instead of a 5/7/5 haiku form, they could experiment with a 7/9/9/7 form, or any combination they want to try, figuring out what pacing feels natural to speech and what feels forced or awkward.

You may want to invite your students to create anthologies that are not solely poems. The world of literature is full of texts that blend poetry with other genres. For example, books like *Out of the Dust* by Karen Hesse and *Amber Was Brave, Essie Was Smart* by Vera B. Williams tell a story through poems. Still other books like *Toad by the Road* by Joanna Ryder, Joyce Sidman’s *Dark Emperor and Other Poems of the Night*, and the Yolen and Adoff examples previously listed mix poems with informational text.

Your poets might cling closely to a mentor anthology and write and revise other kinds of text to accompany the poems they have included.

## Part Five: Editing Poems and Assembling Anthologies for Publication

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Editing poetry, at first, can feel a little oxymoronic. How do you teach students to look for rules of standard English when poetry often breaks so many rules? While true that poetry can break rules, no one poem breaks all—otherwise readers could make no sense of them at all. So you may explain to your writers that poets edit with their reader in mind. They make purposeful choices about what kinds of grammar, spelling, and punctuation rules they are going to follow and if they do not follow some, what alternate rules they will follow. For instance, a young poet might decide that at the end of every idea he will not use a period but instead go to a new line. When he edits, he will check that he always does this. Another writer might choose to capitalize following standard rules, and she will check for this. In other words, you'll teach children to edit their poems for consistency in the grammar rules that they've chosen to observe.

As poets assemble their anthologies, they might also decide to include the mentor poems they used or other published poems that fit within the same theme. This might also be a good opportunity to invite students to carry some of their biggest discoveries about themselves as writers into different genres. A writer might go back to an entry from, say, September or October that fits within their same theme and revise, considering not only the meaning but also the sound of their sentences. An excerpt of this could find its way into his or her anthology.

You will want to support your writers in deciding on an order for the poems in their anthologies. You might return to mentor anthologies at this point, taking a close look at how poems are organized and pausing to consider, "What if this poem were in a different place? What would the effect be of reading it earlier or later than the surrounding poems?" Then your kids can work in partnerships to have similar conversations about their own work, coming to final decisions about placement only after having reflected and reconsidered.

Editing in poetry is also about sound. Children will probably read their poems aloud several times, checking each time to see if they included all the marks, line breaks, and kinds of words that make their poem read just as they want it to sound.

In addition to students publishing anthologies, you may want to consider incorporating a performance aspect to your celebration, where students pick a poem they have written and/or a favorite mentor poem to memorize and perform during the celebration. Poetry is multisensory: create a celebration that reflects the many dimensions of poetry.



## UNIT SEVEN

# Literary Essay and Test Preparation in Writing

MARCH/APRIL

The unit of study combines an abbreviated unit on literary essays and a two- to three-week unit of test prep in writing, designed with New York State's ELA in mind. It also directly supports other similar assessments, such as the NAEP Assessment and state tests in Connecticut, Tennessee, and Florida, among others, which ask students to respond in writing to a passage or passages they've read. Obviously, teachers from other states will need to investigate whether high-stake tests require similar work from students, and you'll want to place this unit prior to the date when your students are assessed. We encourage you to look over the entire unit and make some decisions about it. If you teach very proficient writers, you might decide to progress more quickly through this unit or to bypass some portions of it, since the plans have been written with a special eye on the need to scaffold strugglers so they can do competent work on the tests' required essays. It is only the last part of this unit that is officially test prep, but the entire unit helps students write structured essays about texts.

Literary essay practice offers our students a crucial pathway to the connection between reading and writing. It helps students learn that writing can be a way to not only hold on to one's thinking about a particular subject or about a text but also clarify and elaborate on that thinking. This unit will help students become more skilled in what the Common Core State Standards refer to as "opinion writing"—that is, in the logical thesis-driven writing that was introduced through the interpretive essay unit earlier in the year. The unit does this while also moving students along in their journey toward the analytic text-based work that is the foundation of high school and college classrooms.

In fact, the skill of responding to a text with a reasoned, well-crafted piece of writing is emphasized across several of the Common Core State Standards: it is touched on not only in the standards for opinion writing but also in those for speaking and listening, research, and, to some extent, informational writing. In short, writing about reading can be seen as the gold standard of the CCSS. Your fifth graders will have already tried their hand at this back in October, when they wrote character-driven interpretive essays.

Our latest thinking about this unit has been influenced by the fact that in New York State, standardized tests require students to be ready to write essays at the drop of a hat. Most writers in our schools can whip out a personal narrative easily in a class period, but we need those same writers to write literary essays with equal ease. For teachers whose students struggle under this sort of pressure, we are now recommending that you teach literary essays to help students grasp right from the start what a well-structured, fairly complete essay looks and sounds like.

In the past, we've recommended helping students first develop ideas that are worthy of an essay, then helping them develop the muscles to write each part of an essay well, and finally teaching students to put already-revised parts of an essay together into a draft of an essay. But in this unit plan we're suggesting that right from Day One your students draft whole literary essays. Over time, you'll help them work to improve various parts of those literary essays by revising those parts of all the essays the students have written up to that point.

Across the unit, we expect students' flash-draft essays will go from being very rudimentary (because students' abilities are not yet well developed) toward being more developed (although still flash essays). We're suggesting you give students repeated practice writing flash essays so they internalize the form and voice of the literary essay. This move is defensible especially because students will have already worked in a slower, more bit-by-bit fashion to develop the particular muscles they need for essay writing by doing some of that work during the earlier interpretive essay unit. We're hoping that your fifth graders will build on the work of that unit and write essays that move beyond character interpretation into tracing themes in one text and then across texts.

We hope you will teach this writing unit of study at the tail end or directly following the interpretation text sets unit in the reading workshop. This is important, because in this unit students devote themselves to the work of developing accountable theories about texts. In the reading workshop, students will have already read passages from their club books closely, observing the details of those passages and using that close reading as a way to generate ideas. They will have grown provocative ideas and practiced the habit of developing and supporting those ideas. In the same way that the earlier essay unit allowed for your kids to elaborate in writing on their reading work, the first week of this unit should feel like a natural extension of the reading and talking about text sets.

To support your students in developing these abilities, we hope that during their reading club work, you nudge them to listen to each other's ideas and to notice when

a club member makes a claim about a book that could become a thesis—a “box.” Help the club to talk about that idea at some length, “speaking in essays.” Each club member can open his or her copy of the book and look for text evidence to support the idea that is on the table. In this way, readers will become more proficient at work that is central to the literary essayist, including the work of finding and elaborating on evidence and of retelling a part of the story in a way that is angled to show how this part of the story substantiates a claim. This work of analysis and reflection will be crucial both in preparing your students to be able to do this in writing, bolstering their speaking and listening skills, and in aligning with expectations from the CCSS in these areas. (See the interpretation unit [October] for more on this.)

Teachers, do not expect students to produce flawless drafts of essays. Expect quick essays. Expect students to keep writing or revising another essay every day, so that they become accustomed to writing fluently and with increasing structure, coherency, and precision. As students move through this unit, the quick drafts of essays they produce will be stored in folders, and students will revise all of these essays repeatedly as they learn to incorporate new and more advanced moves into their texts, that is, after teaching students to cite the text, they may return to half a dozen essays, adding citations. After teaching them alternate ways to conclude an essay, they will reexamine their conclusions on a whole stack of essays, rewriting those that call for new conclusions. The goal of this work is to help students master the essay form with the same ease with which they have mastered personal narrative.

In the final part of this unit, you will move to more overt test preparation, when you will introduce your students to the kinds of writing tasks they will likely face on the New York State ELA examination and teach them the frameworks that will support their successful responses to those tasks. You probably want to save a few weeks at the end of this unit to be able to walk students through the different scenarios and give them practice with all possibilities. If the majority of your students did well on the writing task of the test last year (make sure you look at the old tests well before you begin this unit), make sure that you get to the more in-depth work of crafting evidence well. This will challenge those writers to do important new work. You might do this during either part of the unit, but your students’ investment may be higher when they’re writing about their own reading.

## Preparing for the Unit: Charts and Texts

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As you prepare for the unit, it will be important to move charts from the earlier essay unit to front and center in your meeting area. If you have a chart that helps students know the academic language of essay writing, move it to a prominent spot—and if you do not have such a chart, you may want to make it (usually charts are the result of a series of minilessons, but this one needn’t be). Such a chart might feature an essay, with different parts of it labeled: thesis statement, introduction, conclusion, topic sentence, support/evidence, quotation, paraphrase, unpacking, transition. You’ll also want

to move your chart containing what some teachers refer to as “conversational prompts” front and center in your classroom. This chart will probably list phrases such as *in addition, also, an example of that is, another example of that is. . .* Many teachers will have used a chart like this to help students elaborate during the earlier essay unit. They will have kept it alive by referring to it often during whole conversations off the read-aloud, when they worked to help students “talk long” about an idea rather than jumping from one underdeveloped idea to another. Later in the unit, this chart could even be made into smaller table tents or taped-in printouts.

In order for children to write about reading, they’ll need to have some texts to write about. For the first part of this unit, if your students are reading novels and talking in book clubs about the deeper meanings they find in those books, you will probably channel them to write their literary essays about those novels so they use this written form to harvest their interpretations of those books. This decision will support cross-pollination between reading and the writing workshops and will give the first part of this unit extra power, depth, and authenticity. The conversations students have with others about books during reading will allow them to form, revise, and expand their ideas before selecting ones to further develop through writing.

You’ll also want them to write some essays about shorter texts, so you’ll want to be sure your students have access to some rich, provocative short texts as well as novels. One of the advantages to working in a short text is that the process of finding evidence doesn’t take long when one needs only skim a page or two of writing. Then, too, when kids write about a short text, it is easier for them to know that text really well, rereading it several times and mining it in conversations with others. On the other hand, any theory a child might espouse will probably have thinner substantiating support when the text on hand is a short one. Because you will be asking students to think across texts, you will want to try to include some texts that have similar themes. This often works well with collections of texts by the same author.

You may channel all the members of a book club to write about the same texts in the literary essay unit. This way, the social dynamics of the group will support individuals’ work, but you will probably also want to give students some individual choices to escalate their investment in the work. However, you may want to influence the choices of your strugglers so that they are in texts they can read and so that those texts will also allow for the interpretive work.

## Assess Using On-Demand Writing

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As with most writing units, you will want to begin this work on literary essay by finding out what students can do when working within this genre. To do this, you will probably give an on-demand essay prompt that asks them to take fifty minutes and within that amount of time write a quick literary essay about a familiar read-aloud text. You might say something like, “We’ve read and talked about *Freedom Summer* a lot. Right now, will you write a literary essay in which you tell readers an idea that you



have about *Freedom Summer* and then show evidence that supports the idea, drawing on details from the text?" Be sure you have multiple copies of the text you ask students to write about so that they can hold copies in their hands and illustrate their capacity and tendency to cite specific evidence. When you look at your students' essays, the opinion writing continuum, developed by TCRWP, will help you understand your students' levels of proficiency and the pathways they can travel to progress toward increasing levels of proficiency. This continuum is aligned to the Common Core State Standards in Opinion Writing, so it can help you chart your students' progress toward those standards.

If you find that the majority of your students' essays show a clear structure and contain a thesis statement, topic sentences, and transitions, you may decide to jump ahead to Part Two of this unit. Part One is meant to develop this sensibility in students whose writing about reading is not yet clearly organized. Part Two builds on that work by teaching writers how to use evidence more effectively, how to elaborate within an already established structure. If the essay unit was successful in the fall, it's likely that you will be able to move directly to Part Two.

## **Part One: Interactive Writing—A Quick "in-the-Air" Class Essay to Launch the Unit**

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We recommend that you start this unit in an unusual fashion. Instead of teaching a minilesson to launch the unit, we have found it is helpful to lead students in an interactive writing activity in which you and the class co-create a quick literary essay, with each student (or each partnership) writing a version of the literary essay that the class is working on, doing this work "in the air" first and only later on the page. After saying aloud to each other the exact words they might put onto the page and receiving coaching in each additional paragraph of that literary essay, students disperse to put that in-the-air text onto the page to complete it.

Because this day sets up all the work you will want to do for the rest of this unit, we have described it in much more detail than we have the days that follow. We want you to be able to imagine not just the big arc of this day but the fast-paced feel to it and to let you in on all you'll be assessing for and coaching into. All of this will then set you up to continue to support your kids in these same ways in the weeks ahead. Please read this not as a script but as one way this could go, complete with all the thinking that will help you decide how to proceed with your particular class.

To do this work, you'll want to select a fiction text that the class knows well. Many teachers have used a picture book such as *The Other Side* by Jacqueline Woodson or *Those Shoes* by Maribeth Boelts as the grounds for this essay. You may want to begin with just a bit of preliminary assessment work. One way to do this is to say to the class, "Students, we're going to be learning today that any kind of writing can be *said* as well as written. Listen to me *say* a kind of writing, and see if you can determine what kind of writing this is."

I used to love snow, but lately, I haven't liked snow at all. I haven't liked snow because it is hard on my schedule, my finances, and my health.

One reason that I no longer like snow is that it has made it very hard for me to stay on schedule. In the mornings, I leave just enough time to get to work, but then when I get to my car, I find it is buried in snow. I have to spend ten minutes brushing the snow off, and then if I try to drive quickly to make up for lost time, I find myself careening around corners, almost landing in snow banks. So snow is bad for my schedule because it makes me get off to a late start to my day.

Another reason that I no longer like snow is that it is hard on my finances. The other day, I had to spend . . .

By this time, some students should have their hands in the air and be ready to call out, "That's an essay." You needn't continue the essay—the point will be made. "You are right. Starting today, you'll all be saying *essays* a lot."

Teachers, tell students that this first day of the writing unit will not follow a usual format. You'll be doing a shared writing activity for twenty-five minutes on the rug and then sending students to write for fifteen minutes. You might set it up like this:

Specifically, today, instead of a usual minilesson, let's work together on the rug to say an essay about . . . (and you pick the text). To write an essay about a text, you first need to look back over the text, so let's do that now. As we look back over the book, you will think, as you would whenever you are going to write an essay about a text, "What idea do I have about this book that I could write about in an essay?"

Then, teachers, you'd want to skim through the book ever so quickly, and afterwards you'd ask students to then take a minute to jot ideas they have about the book in their notebooks. Don't help them at this point—let this be something of an assessment. You will be looking for them to bring all of the idea work they have been doing in reading workshop into writing. Are they growing ideas about character? About the book's theme? Are they just stating facts or questions, not ideas? Teachers, if your students haven't yet had much practice interpreting, they'll probably generate ideas about character traits. This seems to be the work that readers find most accessible. If most of your students' ideas are character-based, you will want to eventually work on supporting their interpretations. But meanwhile, you will probably decide to launch this unit by showing readers how to write a literary essay that revolves around a writer's claim about the protagonist (so and so is a good friend; so and so is determined . . .).

If many of your students simply retell instead of jotting ideas, do a voiceover to the whole class, reminding students of sources for ideas—drawing on whatever you have taught in earlier units. "Remember, readers can get ideas by thinking about the kind of person that the main character is. We can get ideas by thinking about the ways the character changes or by thinking about what the main character learns. How does the main character change? What does the main character learn in this story?" Give

them a minute for writing the ideas, not ten minutes, expecting a few sentences or two long entries. After a minute for the students to jot, harvest some of their ideas, scrawling a few ideas that students volunteer on chart paper. For now, don't fix them; just jot them. As you do this, notice the level of ideas that students have generated. If the ideas are mostly character traits, you know you have some work to do through the reading unit in order to help them develop more sophisticated interpretations. But especially for now, at the start of this unit, you are trying to help kids learn essay structure more than you are trying to help them develop high-level interpretations of the texts. As you jot a bunch of ideas onto chart paper, you'll want to think about choosing one for the essay that the group will write, aiming to settle upon an idea that feels within reach for most of the students.

Teachers, something to note: in this work, you will be helping students write essays in which they provide evidence from the text to support their ideas. Sometimes when readers generate ideas that are about the theme of a very short text, those ideas may only surface at the very end of the story. If you are helping students write essays in which they provide multiple instances of text evidence, there may not be a lot to draw upon. For example, a student writing a literary essay about *Those Shoes* might want to write, "In this book, Jeremy learns that friends are more important than the 'right' clothes." This claim reflects a strong understanding of the book's lessons, but the evidence supporting the claim is mostly concentrated at the very end of the book as it is only in the final scene of the book that Jeremy learns this lesson. In this case, you might quietly steer the class toward ideas that do have evidence throughout the story.

If the story is *The Other Side*, one of the ideas will probably be something to the effect of "the children find ways to connect with each other even though the adults try to keep them apart." You could select this idea from the list on the chart paper and say to the class, "Let's work together to *say* the start of an essay about that idea. Turn and say the start of such an essay to your partner." Teachers, plan on writing (and *saying*) an essay that is low-level and straightforward enough that it is accessible to almost everyone in the class. You'll be coaching the class to state the claim and then to find places in the text to support the claim, writing a paragraph about each bit of evidence. It is more advanced to forecast the instances or reasons that a writer will end up addressing in the upcoming essay—you do not need to do that now.

You may need to be more clear to kids about what you mean by suggesting they say the start of the essay to each other. "You can't just start the essay by saying, 'The children find ways to connect.' You probably need to pretty it up, with the title of the book and all. So say the start of our essay to your partner." Soon the class will have produced the start to the essay. You might say a version aloud: "Jacqueline Woodson's picture book *The Other Side* teaches readers that children find ways to connect even when grown-ups are trying to keep them apart. Okay, writers. Once we have written the start to the essay and made our claim, we need to think of *reasons* or *examples*, right? So right now, reread your copy of the story with your partner, and find and mark parts of the text that show that children connect even when grown-ups try to keep them apart."

As children talk, you might do a voiceover to remind students to draw from all parts of the story, including something that occurs early and something that occurs late in the story. Two minutes later, ask one student to point out a part of the text that everyone can use as an example, and coach kids to write the first body paragraph “in the air” to each other, starting with the transitional phrase, “*Early in the story . . .* (the children find ways to connect with each other). *One example is the time when . . .*” Soon one writer will say a draft of the essay, starting at the very beginning:

Jacqueline Woodson’s picture book *The Other Side* teaches readers that children find ways to connect even when grown-ups are trying to keep them apart.

Early in the story, the children connect with each other. For example, when the girls are on different sides of the fence and playing alone, one of the girls, Annie, asks Sandra and Clover if she can play with them.

Teachers, obviously there is more that a writer could do at this point (more on this later), but your goal is not to help students write perfect essays. It is, instead, to be sure they all grasp the essentials of a competent essay. You will need to decide whether this is challenging enough work for your class, and if it is, you could simply proceed to coach them to look for another example. You might do this by saying something like, “So now it is time for a second reason, a second body paragraph. Remember you need to go back to the claim and restate it, adding your next reason, your next example.” Help students preface the next paragraph with a transition, one that will work in many literary essays: “*Later in the story, there are more examples of the girls trying to connect with each other. For example. . .*” Again, you will want all students to do the work, putting a finger on the part of the story they reference as evidence and saying the start of their second body paragraph aloud (“in the air”) to each other. Then you’ll call on one child to share his or her second body paragraph with the class. If the child you call on to start this work selects a portion of the story that is only tangentially related to the main claim, you might coach by saying, “Does this *hit you over the head* as an example of the children connecting with each other, or is it sort of loosely connected to that idea? If it is not an obvious connection, if it doesn’t hit you over the head, look for a part of the story that obviously supports your idea.”

According to Webb’s Depth of Knowledge criteria, this is high-level work, even though you are scaffolding it. The key will be to coach the students into reaching for the more appropriate evidence without giving it to them, if you can help it. It is the sorting of evidence that makes this a more complex task than merely retelling, so if you let kids give any old example as evidence, you are not highlighting the work that is both rewarding and cognitively demanding.

Of course, students will in this fashion be writing (saying, actually) very sparse paragraphs, and you may look ahead in this write-up to see ways to extend this work and use those ways right now. Remember, however, that the goal for today is to bring all your students into writing a whole essay, even if it is a very rudimentary one. Still, it is likely that your students will be able to do a bit more, and the next

obvious step is to teach them that after citing an example from the text, it is helpful to “unpack” the example by writing, “This shows that. . .” For example, students might say, “This shows that even though Annie lives on the other side of the fence, she still tries to connect with the girls.” Later, we will help you extend this effort to elaborate on cited evidence.

Chances are that by now it will feel as if your students have spent enough time working together on the carpet, and so you will want to send them all off to their desks to write an essay. You can let students know that they have options. They could write the essay the class has been working on together, or they could take another idea about the text and follow the same template, writing a similarly structured essay about a different idea. This, of course, allows for your more proficient writers to spread their wings just a bit.

You may wonder whether the essay that you and the class worked on together is a complete one, since it will presumably end abruptly. You are right to wonder, and some students—we’ve seen many—may add a concluding paragraph when they write their own essays. Others will not. Another day, you will want to show the class that it is great to end an essay with a final paragraph that pulls the distinct examples together and advances the claim. If you wanted to do this instruction now, you could help them start the final section by saying, “Now, as I think about my idea that ‘children try to connect even when grown-ups are keeping them apart,’ I realize that . . .” and channel them to come to some new idea that stands on the shoulders of the first one. This is important work, whether you teach it now or later, because it sets students up to realize that essays can lead us toward new thoughts and new spoken essays.

When you send kids off to write whole essays themselves, in the fifteen or twenty minutes remaining in the workshop, you’ll need to coach kids to write, write, write, fast and furiously. You may show them prompts for the essay such as these:

- State the claim like it is the start of an essay.
- Rehearse for the essay, locating places in the text that support the claim (boxes and bullets).
- Take the first part of the text. Say, in a new paragraph, “Early in the text, there are examples of . . . (and repeat your claim). One example is the time when. . .”
- Be sure to cite detailed actions and words.
- Unpack this example by writing, “This shows . . .” and refer back to the claim.
- Then cite a second example, again using the transitional phrases as in the first paragraph, and again unpack this.

As children write, you can do some fast prompts. If one is retelling the text, say, “Don’t retell the whole story. What particular part illustrates your idea? Go to just that part.” If someone is writing without any elaboration, say, “Don’t just mention that a part supports your idea. Show how it supports your idea by citing little detailed actions or words and then telling the reader how those actions or words make your point.”

## Part Two: Revising Essays Quickly and Developing Compare-Contrast Essays across Texts

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Of course, once your students have written these little essays, you’ll study their work to understand the instruction you will need to provide to take them to the next step. You may decide to do this same work across the curriculum as well as during writing. Our content-area curricular calendar has specific recommendations for how to follow up this work in other disciplines.

If you are starting with this part, you will want your students to use their on-demand essays as the basis for this next work.

### *Quick Revisions of First Drafts*

Save the essays that students write—perhaps each writer has a folder full of these—because soon you will teach them certain things that essayists do. You’ll want them to go back and revise each of their essays to meet these new criteria. For example, on the second day of this workshop, if students did not include the transitional words that you prompted them to use at the start of their body paragraphs and did not indent those paragraphs, then you’ll probably teach a minilesson about the importance of revision. You’ll probably tell writers that the first thing essayists check on is the structure of their essay, suggesting they check that they’ve used transitional words and restated their claim at the start of each of their body paragraphs.

Writers *will* probably have used transitional words and restated their claim at the start of the first body paragraph, especially because they received so much support for doing this. But many of them will have just moved from one paragraph to the next without a new transition, and especially without restating the claim, referencing the opening paragraph of the essay. This instruction directly supports the CCSS, which require students to use clear paragraphs and to link ideas within and across categories of information using words, phrases, and clauses (e.g., *in contrast, especially*). You can support the revisions they need to do by distributing scissors and tape, although you will also have some very fluent writers who created a torrent of unstructured text and need to revise from the start, this time constraining themselves into paragraphs from the beginning.



Your teaching might sound like this: “Writers, many of you wrote a ton yesterday, and that is great. But here’s the thing. Many of you wrote like Bob did—do you see how his writing goes all the way down the page, without any breaks? Today I want to teach you that there is a saying, ‘First things first.’ And when writing an essay, the first thing is structure, is organization. The simplest, clearest way to organize an essay is to divide your essay into paragraphs, to use transitions, and to indent at the start of each paragraph.” In the teaching part of such a minilesson, you could recruit the class to join you as you help one student—say, Bob—reread and rethink his essay, deciding whether he can scissor it into paragraphs or whether he needs to write it over again, this time dividing it into paragraphs. “So let’s see if we can help Bob find his first example and then cut his essay up so that this first example is in a separate paragraph.” (Drawing a box around each paragraph is another option.) If you show the writers how to help Bob with this first paragraph, kids can work with partners to figure out what Bob could have done with his second paragraph, or they could use the active involvement portion of the minilesson to look over their own writing, noting their own structure.

If Day Two of the unit channels students to rewrite their first essay, working on structure, Day Three could give students a chance to write another essay, this time with much less support. Your teaching point on this day would probably emphasize that we, as writers, take a moment to think over the writing that we’re going to be doing. When we do that thinking, we often remind ourselves of how this kind of writing goes. That teaching point would allow you to review all that you scaffolded on Day One, referencing the list of things that you hope writers have internalized. So this time, you do not need to walk kids step by step through the process of writing a simple literary essay, as you did on the preceding day, nor will you leave students entirely on their own. Teachers, if you grasp the principle of withdrawing scaffolds as soon as you can, then you’ll gauge the amount of support your students need and provide it accordingly. Perhaps this second essay will be written about a book that readers have been talking about during the reading workshop, with reading club partners writing at least the start of one shared essay “in the air” before separating to each put their own version of that essay on the page.

### *Writing across Texts: Compare-Contrast Essays*

We are imagining that the overall plan for the unit is such that your students will continue to write quick essays every other day, revising all their essays on the days between. After children write their second essay with much less scaffolding support from you, you’ll study those essays and think about what the next big step is that you could teach, again reaching for something that feels accessible. If their essays are still not structured and still need major help with transitions and paragraphs, you may need, on Day Four, to reteach the minilesson you taught on Day Two: “Writers, remember that after writing an essay, we shift from being writers to being readers. We read

over our draft of an essay, remembering to check ‘first things first.’ This means we check for structure and revise our essay if it is not well structured.”

It is likely, however, that only a small group will need that support and that most of your students will be ready for you to lift the bar, teaching them another goal that writers set for themselves. There is, of course, no set sequence for what aspects of essay writing should be taught. But if you have taught writers to make a claim about one text and to structure an essay around evidence from that text, you may now want to introduce structures for writing about more than one text. Given that the last part of the interpretation unit in reading focused on thinking across texts, your fifth graders should already have thought of themes and life-lessons that emerge in more than one book.

It makes sense, then, to invite your students to try some of this thinking out, using a big idea that they have noticed in their reading and that cuts across multiple sources. This work is important because it connects to the “compare and contrast” work that is a major thread in the CCSS, and because fifth graders will need to be able to write quickly and authoritatively across more than one text on the New York State ELA.

To teach into this, you might introduce the idea by saying, “Writers, in reading workshop last week, we had an amazing conversation where we realized that one life-lesson we learned from Kate DiCamillo’s *The Tiger Rising* also applies to *The Year the Swallows Came Early*, by Kathryn Fitzmaurice, although in different ways. We’re going to try writing a new kind of essay, one that focuses on a theme or a life-lesson that we notice in more than one text, and possibly in our own lives as well.”

The kinds of thesis statements you can expect and that you might demonstrate are:

Kathryn Fitzmaurice in *The Year the Swallows Came Early* and Kate DiCamillo in *The Tiger Rising* both teach us that trying to bury your feelings will only hurt you in the end.

- In *The Year the Swallows Came Early*, Eleanor finds that holding in her feelings about her father only keeps her from connecting to her mother.
- In *The Tiger Rising* by Kate DiCamillo, Rob learns that trying to hide his sadness only makes him feel more alone.

These essays might, then consist of two body paragraphs, but some writers might want to add either a third text or a paragraph connecting the theme to their own experience. As with the last essay, you will expect and prompt students to develop their boxes-and-bullets outline quickly, given that the idea that will become the central claim should be migrating over from reading workshop with much talk, thought, and Post-it work behind it.

The body paragraph revision lessons that you might choose here, if you are not revisiting teaching points that still need shoring up from their on-demand essay (which you very well may be!), could show students how literary essayists write. This is not just to describe the theme itself but to analyze how an author succeeds in getting this theme across. When looking across texts, it becomes natural to discuss how one author's treatment of a theme differs from another author's treatment of the same theme. This corresponds to a Common Core State Standards reading standard asking fifth graders to compare and contrast "stories in the same genre on their approaches to similar themes and topics." It's important, therefore, to support students in the work of not just naming the theme but noticing how an author "approaches" this theme. In *The Tiger Rising*, then, an essayist could comment on the choice of DiCamillo to give Rob a rash as a way to show that something inside him is trying to get out, whereas, in *The Year the Swallows Came Early*, Fitzmaurice uses an earthquake at the end of the book as a fitting metaphor for an upheaval, for the letting loose of something that has been trapped, like Eleanor's feelings for her father. Comparing key scenes, repeated images, and patterns across texts will be fruitful ways for writers to approach this work.

It is likely that many of your writers will not have been very specific or detailed when referencing the text, and you'll want to teach them to unpack and elaborate cited examples. You might also tuck in reminders about using the correct conventions when referring to titles of novels or stories (underlining for novels, quotation marks for stories), as required by the language standards of the CCSS.

In writing about Winn Dixie, for example, a writer may have written, "Winn Dixie helps Opal make friends with people in the town. Early in the book, for example, Winn Dixie helps her make friends with the librarian." You can teach writers that specifics matter: proper names, exact quotes, precise actions. To teach this, you will want to channel students to actually underline key words and phrases from the text, bringing those into their literary essays. Remember that when writers revise to make sure their references to the text are specific, they can revise not just the essay they just wrote (across two texts) but also the two other essays they will have written across the course of this unit. As writers continue to alternate between drafting flash-draft essays and revising them, you will continue to assess their writing and decide what new things you want to teach them. You'll generally teach new muscles on the revision days, expecting students to revise all their essays to incorporate those new muscles. Then on the days when students write flash-drafts, you'll remind them of the growing number of things they have now learned. Whatever the students learn to do first as a form of revision will eventually become part of their first-draft writing. You'll expect that their third or fourth essay will be written with paragraphs, transitions, specific references to the text, and so forth.

Before long, you'll want to teach students to write introductory paragraphs. There are various ways to write introductions. Sometimes, it helps to approach a literary essay by writing about literature in general, saying broad Hallmark moment statements such as "People can learn life-lessons not only from school but also from

books” or “I used to read books for the plot, but more and more I read books also for the life-lessons.” When helping students to write these introductory paragraphs, you can teach them a few templates that often work: “I used to think . . . but now I believe . . .” or “Some people think . . . but I believe . . .” or “When I first read . . . I thought . . . but now as I reread it, I realize. . . .” It sometimes helps to include a tiny summary of the text within the opening paragraph, and you could teach writers that the template “(Somebody) wants . . . and so . . . but . . . in the end . . .” can help them write those summaries.

In the same minilesson or a different one, you might also teach writers to revise their essays by writing closings. You might teach writers that closing paragraphs will probably be a place to link the story’s message to the writer’s own life—the ending is a good place for a Hallmark moment! “These stories teach me that I, too. . . .” An alternative is to link to a social issue in the world.

As you continue to alternate between students writing flash-drafts in which they draw on their ever-growing repertoire of skills and students learning more things that literary essayists do and revising their essays to include them, there are a few predictable lessons you will probably need to teach. The session “Packaging and Polishing Literary Essays” from *Literary Essays* can help you teach students to read their drafts carefully, most likely with a writing partner. They can look for places where there are gaps (in thinking or transitions) and fill those gaps as they revise. You will probably also need to teach students how to cite more than one bit of the text by using transitional phrases within a paragraph as well as between them. After citing one example, a writer might write *also* or *in addition* and then include a second example.

You will certainly need to help students elaborate upon whatever they have cited. If you channel them to quote or paraphrase the text and then discuss how the referenced passage makes their point, you’ll find that students are often at a loss for words. If a student has claimed that Paul Revere was brave and then developed this claim by citing a passage in the text that discusses him riding at breakneck speed in the middle of the night, you’ll want that student to be able to write, “This shows that Paul Revere was brave because he didn’t. . . .” In order to help students elaborate, you’ll want to explain that what they do on the paper is to essentially have a little book talk right there on the page, talking over what the referenced passage does show. You can coach some students who struggle to make a little word bank of words that reiterate their claim, copying many of these exactly from the text. Revere was a “bold, fearless, eager patriot.” If a child had those words on his or her page and wanted to show how a detail illustrated Revere’s qualities, he could do so more easily: “The way that Revere rode through the night, from one town to another, shows that he was a fearless patriot.” The use of a synonym list helps a child to inch from repeating toward paraphrasing.

Our aim has been, above all, to help students become at home with the structure and conventions of this genre. A folder full of five or six quick essays that have been constructed and then revised means writers have now had considerable practice

putting together and developing a basic idea-based (boxes-and-bullets) essay. One route that the unit could take from here is to teach children to slow down and write a more sophisticated and developed literary essay. This would mean working for a week to write one literary essay and then working approximately as long revising that essay. If you decided to teach students to write more ambitious essays, the essays included in the book *Literary Essays* can serve as mentor texts for you, and that book can help you with this instruction. You could also draw from the following list of mini-lesson ideas, teaching this content in whatever sequence makes sense to you. Ideally, you are still encouraging students to be able to do this work in a relatively short time frame so that, given a little time to make some changes, they will have some strategies they can turn to that take only five or ten minutes to accomplish, rather than work that stretches over days.

- Deciding when to paraphrase and when to cite directly
- Making more sophisticated transitions
- Writing one-sentence retellings of texts to include in the introduction
- Commenting on how an author's craft decisions affect the reader
- Building out conclusions that illustrate the significance of the thesis statement and/or relate to real life
- Elaborating on evidence by staying focused on the part of the story that best supports an idea, citing specific details (rather than retelling the whole story)
- Revising to include forecasting sentences at important points, especially at the beginning of paragraphs. (These sentences let the reader know what the next part will mostly be about.)

### **Part Three: Writing for the New York State ELA (or Other Similar Standardized Tests Requiring Writing about Reading)**

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One thing that state tests across the nation have taught us is that the tests demand writers who are flexible and resilient, who compose swiftly and with fluency. These young writers need to be able to write on demand about subjects with which they may not be familiar. They need to be able to do this using text support from texts that may be inaccessible to support an idea constructed in response to a prompt. They need to write with clear structure, with some sense of voice and style, and they need to use helpful and visible transitions in their writing. Finally, their vocabulary needs to be sophisticated and literary. That is what is on the rubric for New York State, and it is

probably on other states' rubrics as well. To prepare students to write for the state test, we need to prepare them to write for specific tasks, knowing what is on the rubric.

### **The New York State ELA Rubric Emphasizes Four Elements:**

1. Structure, which is most clearly evident by a thesis and supporting evidence in clearly indented paragraphs and a conclusion that states what has been argued and perhaps offers an additional insight
2. Text support, which is clearly shown by quoting or paraphrasing or referencing the text or texts that are given
3. Craft, which is clearly shown by the use of detail, transitions, long and short sentence structure, control of conventions, and literary vocabulary
4. Insight, which is shown most easily by ideas about the text and by connections outside of or beyond the text that are clearly related to the text

Almost all state tests measure student writing by these qualities; they simply name them with different terms on their rubrics. The NYS ELA values these qualities.

This unit takes a turn toward test prep with the New York State ELA in mind. In order for students to do well on the essays embedded in that test, they appear to need to be able to write a boxes-and-bullets essay such as you will have taught already. The chances are good, however, that such an essay would draw on two texts rather than one. In addition, students must be able to write argument essays, again drawing on two texts, and to write compare-and-contrast essays. If your upcoming work in the unit is focused primarily on test-preparation work, you'll probably want to channel students to write about short texts rather than books from here on. If you do this, we recommend you select two pairs of texts that your students can read, perhaps drawing on passages used in previous tests.

Until now students have been writing off ideas picked out of a single literary novel that they probably read at length during reading workshop time. The texts provided in the tests, however, will be two short passages, perhaps one literary and one informational (we cannot know for sure about the genres until we are closer to the time of the test). The upside is that the test prompts themselves often provide the idea, claim, or thesis that writers must defend, so this seven to ten minutes of reading can afford to be quick, literal, and extractive. Unlike the deep rereading work that kids may have needed to do in order to develop deeper interpretations from whole novels, they can shortcut to a more bare-bones reading that sets them up to write off a predeveloped claim. Remember, writers will need to rely on all that they've learned about structure, about gluing paragraphs together logically with transitions, about citing from the text,



about unpacking cited examples and concluding in order to do this work well. And, of course, they need speed.

To start this work, you might want a pair of passages from one test to be stretched across many cycles of work, that is, with different writing prompts. This will save you time as well as making children familiar with different kinds of prompts. For example, you might start by using the same two passages to teach students how they can write a boxes-and-bullets, claim-and-support essay drawing on the two related texts and also how they can write an argument (drawing on the two related texts) and compare-and-contrast essay (drawing on those same two texts). This would mean that during the writing workshop, students need not do a lot of writing. They'll instead mine the same passages repeatedly. For example, we recently used a passage about a guide dog and one about a guide horse. In teaching students to write a boxes-and-bullets, claim-and-support essay drawing on both these texts, we gave students a prompt such as "Write about the ways that animals can support handicapped people." When teaching students to write an argument, drawing on two texts, we gave them the question, "If you were blind and had to choose between a guide dog and a guide pony, which would you choose? Draw on details from the two texts to support your answer." To teach students to compare and contrast, we channeled them toward comparing the relative merits of guide dogs versus guide ponies. Because this portion of the unit again imagines students writing multiple flash-draft essays in each form, you will probably want to make at least two sets of paired passages, with questions that channel them toward these three different kinds of essays.

It is important while selecting these new replacement passages to pick ones that will be easy for most of your students to read. If, for example, you have a whole class of fifth-grade strugglers, we recommend doing a few cycles of work using texts from the fourth-grade ELA. Of course, another option is to decide that not all kids need to practice on the same texts. After the first day of the week, which is a shared experience on familiar texts, you might have groups work on different texts with slightly different prompts that are linked to easier and harder passages. Or you might simplify some of your texts so you have more than one version in the room. You will need to find texts to use—you can gather the samples from Book 3 of the grades four, six, and eight tests from the past few years. If your school purchased test-prep books, you can harvest texts from those books as well. In addition, the texts on the NYC social studies website are helpful informational texts, as are the short texts in Stephanie Harvey's *Comprehension Toolkit*. Keep in mind that we expect the texts this year, as they were in spring of 2011, to be closer to two pages in length, rather than three-quarters to one page.

We have found that the essay prompts for Book 3 of the New York State ELA have tended to lend themselves to a few different essay structures. While we cannot with certainty predict which of these will provide the best response to any particular grade's task this year, we do know that it will help students to be familiar with a menu of possible structures, some of which should be:

1. boxes and bullets
2. compare-contrast essays
3. argument essays
4. simply answering the questions in order, or responding to the parts of the prompt in the order in which the questions are asked

The first of these structures is a simple idea-based essay, much like the ones children have been writing so far. To start, you might share a few test prompts with children that set them up to write a simple idea-based boxes-and-bullets essay. For example: “Write about the challenges of being a gold rusher . . . drawing on two texts” or “Write about how people who are different can still be friends . . . drawing on two texts that both teach this.” Together, the class might work on reading an essay prompt, reviewing two familiar texts with that prompt in mind, then writing-in-the-air the first two paragraphs of that essay. As this happens, you might record a few key sentences of the whole-class version on chart paper.

After fifteen to twenty minutes of a shared writing-in-the-air experience, you’ll send students off from the meeting area to write the entire essay, fast and furiously, from beginning to end. Most children will probably be able to complete the entire essay. The next day, you might ask children to look over these essays and make quick revisions, using all they know about paragraphing, using transitions, and citing from the text. Remember that on actual timed tests, children do not have the luxury of returning to revise an undeveloped draft—they have time to produce one draft alone, so their “revisions” need to be as inbuilt and spontaneous to this initial draft as possible. Teach children that their next first draft now needs to be written in paragraphs, must include transitions, and must cite from the text. They need not wait until the *end* of a drafting cycle to make these additional changes. With this requirement in mind, give them a new prompt (using the same two texts) to write a boxes-and-bullets essay from.

Since writers are now drawing from two texts instead of one, you will want to teach children to quickly read both texts within seven to ten minutes and to refer to *both* for citations and evidence. You might teach them to underline evidence when they read each text, reminding them to balance their references to both the passages. Often, one of these texts is informational, and this may clash with the fact that, so far, children have been writing from their fiction novels. You’ll want to unearth charts from the nonfiction unit and revisit strategies for finding main ideas and for mining paragraphs for topic sentences so that children navigate these texts quickly and efficiently. You’ll probably then choose a different pair of texts for them to write an essay from, reminding them to read these for the main ideas within and to underline citable evidence from both before they write their next quick essay.

Writers must also be aware that pace and expectations change during test-prep work. Emphasize that they must begin with a mental outline (boxes and bullets) for how their essay will be structured and that they must aim to finish within the set time by making it a habit to glance at the clock. They must write legibly and pay attention to conventions—explain that these things add up when tests are graded. “Real writers often need to train ourselves to work to deadlines and finish a piece of writing by a certain time,” you’ll teach. You’ll probably then provide another claims-and-evidence prompt off the second pair of texts, this time asking children to pace themselves to finish essays within the allotted time.

Channel them to self-monitor for time and pacing while writing. For example, when the first ten minutes are up, children should have introduced a claim; at the end of twenty minutes, they should have provided two or three cited reasons; and by the end of twenty-five minutes, they should be wrapping up their conclusions. You might require that children put on their wristwatches or pair-monitor each other’s time and pace. When they’re finished, partners might evaluate each other’s work against a checklist of strategies and conventions (paragraphing, using transitions, etc.) to note whether these have been included.

The second essay structure you’ll want to teach children is the compare-contrast essay. To start this work, you might pick two categories from children’s everyday lives and prompt them to compare and contrast these: taking the bus versus riding the subway, being the oldest versus being the youngest of siblings, the class’s pet frog and their pet ducklings, the Nintendo DS versus the PSP. The two categories must be close to your children’s lives, ones that you know them to be expert in. Ask them to suggest ways in which the two categories are similar (both the bus and the subway have the same fare, both cover roughly the same routes, both are run by the same agency) and ways in which they are different (the bus allows one to see the environment while the subway goes through underground tunnels, a bus takes far longer than the subway, etc.). You might stand and take notes on an overhead board as they generate these lists verbally. Some teachers find it helpful to do this work on a T-chart. As the children do this, you’ll note that this is not new work, that they are quite adept at comparing and contrasting in their daily lives. What will be new, however, is taking this familiar compare-contrast schema and fitting it into an organized essay structure.

You’ll therefore want to model how to use their lists of similarities and differences to create a compare-and-contrast essay. Start such an essay off before them: introduce a thesis statement (Buses and subway trains are somewhat the same and somewhat different) and elaborate their similarities in the next paragraph and their differences in the third paragraph. Then prompt children to do the same work in partnerships. Suggest another pair of categories from children’s everyday lives, and ask them to create a combined T-chart or similarities and differences. Then prompt one partner to “say” a thesis statement using the template “X and y are somewhat the same and somewhat different,” or “X and y have many similarities and differences,” or “X and Y are partly the same and partly different.” Then have partners state

and elaborate the similarities, counting these off on their fingers, before stating and elaborating differences.

As soon as possible, move children to do similar compare-and-contrast work off the two passages you selected earlier. Prompt them to compare two categories from within these texts (e.g., “X and Y were both \_\_\_\_\_ who faced many challenges. Write an essay in which you compare and contrast the challenges that each faced”) by making a T-chart, reminding them that they’ll need to consult both texts together to develop this chart. You may want to teach kids to sort the items on their chart from most significant to least or from most clearly the same to less clearly similar. Then you’ll show kids how to circle the items on the chart that are the same for X and Y—they’ll describe those in their first body paragraph, which will describe similarities. The rest they’ll list in their next body paragraph, which will describe differences. This kind of organization is only one way to structure an essay, of course—but it is an easy way to get most of your kids into this structure.

As before, once writers get going with a few flash drafts, you’ll want to teach strategies to refine compare-and-contrast essays. For instance, you might teach children that when citing evidence from texts in a compare-and-contrast essay, they will want to be specific and that they might paraphrase instead of quoting extensively while doing so. You may prompt them with the specific words with which to begin paragraphs: “Examples of how X and Y are similar include . . .” or “Examples of how X and Y are different include. . .” This shows how X and Y are different. You will want to provide children with the language of comparing (*both, alike, similarly, in the same way, correspondingly, this is just like, this reminds us of*) as well as the language of contrasting (*on the other hand, however, contrary to this, instead of, in contrast, opposite to this, at variance with*). Once children have written their first two quick essays, you’ll want to show them how to craft an effective conclusion, one that restates the thesis, perhaps by adding whether the similarities outweigh the differences or vice versa: “Even though X and Y have a few things in common, they are largely different,” or “X and Y are quite alike, save for a few small differences.”

Once children have a few compare-and-contrast essays in their folders, you might move them along to a third essay structure. This is the argument essay. You should know in advance that you will be teaching your children to forward and defend a claim, to consider and refute counterclaims, then to reinforce (and, to an extent, reinvent) the original claim as part of a conclusion. When teaching this structure, the good news is that children are natural arguers. Rather than starting right away by showing how to argue in ways that draw on texts, you might start by helping them do a bit of in-the-air writing in which they argue about something closer to home. You might show them how you could argue in a very simple essay format, including in your argument the elements of the essay (such as the claim, the supporting evidence, and the conclusion) as well as the new element that you’ll be introducing: refuting a counterclaim.

You might tell them: “Students, today we’re going to begin a new kind of essay—the argument essay. You’re all great at arguing. I should know; I keep hearing you.

Before we get deep into this work, I want to teach you that an argument can be *said* like an essay. Listen to me say an argument essay. You'll be able to pick out the claim and the evidence, but more importantly, listen to see if you can pick out the one move that makes an argument essay different from the other idea-based essays you've been writing till now. I'll give you a hint: it's called "shooting down the counterargument." It's where I will consider an opposite argument and poke holes in it, showing why it isn't a strong one. See if you can pick out the point when I do this.

I want to argue that kids should have more time at recess.

Kids should have more time at recess because they are getting overweight and recess gives kids good exercise so they don't get fat and have heart attacks. Also, kids should have more time at recess because fresh air is good for kids and helps them concentrate when they come back into school. If you just sit in a chair all day, you practically fall asleep.

You might argue that recess is a waste of learning time. You might say that school is for education, not for fun. I disagree because I think a little bit of recess makes the learning time much more powerful. Otherwise, if there is no recess, half the class ends up falling asleep, and some kids act bad and make it so no one can learn.

"See what I did? I considered what someone arguing against me would say—that recess is a waste of learning time. I considered an opposite argument and tried to squish it with logic."

You might set children up to "say" an argument essay to partners. Provide a prompt such as "Which is better—vanilla or chocolate ice cream?" or "Which is the better team, the Giants or the Patriots?" and ask partner one to choose a side as partner two listens. Provide step-wise directions for how this argument essay might go. At the start, say to them, "Tell your partner which side you have chosen to say your essay in favor of," and provide thirty seconds for kids to do this. Then say, "Once you've chosen a side, tell your partner why you think this side is better. Give one or two reasons." Again, pause to let children do this before proceeding with the third step. "Now, consider what someone arguing against your flavor/team might say. Consider a weakness that they might point out with your topic. Then tell your partner why they're wrong and shoot down their argument with a reason."

After children have had a go at these three steps with such assisted practice, call their attention to what they just did. "Writers, you did three things just now. First, you chose a side to argue for. Second, you came up with reasons to support your side. And third, you considered the opposite side's argument and explained why it wasn't as good." As you count these three steps out, you might also put them up on a chart so that children can visualize the argument essay as being distinct from the claim-and-supports (boxes-and-bullets) essay or the compare-and-contrast essay. Now you might now provide a second prompt ("Which is better—wearing uniforms or choosing what to wear to school everyday?" or "Which is more fun—art or math?") and this

time ask partner two to “say” the essay out loud to partner one, asking partnerships to refer to the chart to check off each of the three steps. Once children have “said” argument essays out loud, you’ll want to bring back the two pairs of passages they wrote their claim-and-supports essays from earlier, this time using different prompts, ones that ask them to choose one or the other side of an argument. For instance, previous test prompts have followed formats such as *“The authors of ‘Passage X’ and ‘Passage Y’ both live unusual lives. Write an essay in which you explain which lifestyle you would prefer and why,”* or *“The main characters in ‘Text 1’ and ‘Text 2’ helped other people in different ways. Would you prefer to help the way X does or the way Y does?”*

Test prompts do not overtly state whether students are required to write an essay that is “simple idea” based or argument-based or one that requires compare and contrast. Therefore, students will need your help in learning how to read the prompt and deciding upon the appropriate essay structure. Teach them to pay attention to the clues within the prompt. For example, a prompt that begins with the questioning “Which” is likely asking them to pick one side of an argument. Remind them that when the prompt asks them to pick one of two provided alternatives (X versus Y), they are probably being asked to construct an argument essay. Tell them they’ll know when the prompt asks them to write a compare-and-contrast essay because it will use the words *similar* and *different*, or *similarities* and *differences*, or *the same* and *different*, or *what’s in common* and *what’s different*. For instance, if the prompt asks students to explain how puppies and kittens are similar and different, then they know they are being asked to write a compare-and-contrast essay. But if the prompt asks for which of these two they’d choose for a pet, they need to be aware that they’re being asked to construct an argument.

Of course, the test may throw a curveball at kids on occasion, asking them to argue a side and then to compare and contrast as part of that argument. You can decide if you simply want to tell the kids this or practice it, perhaps even with the kids rewriting some of the prompts so that writers are asked to write with more than one structure. For instance:

Write an essay in which you discuss how children can raise butterflies and tadpoles. What’s different about these two?

There’s no way to predict exactly what the test prompts might be. We want our kids, therefore, to be resilient writers who realize they have many writing muscles. They should be ready to argue a side, compare and contrast, and teach information—all using evidence from texts they read.

The fourth and final essay writing structure you’ll want to teach students this month is specific to tests and not one they will work on in real life. For this reason alone, it requires explicit instruction. You’ll show students how we can’t always predict exactly how the test writers will write the questions or prompts, which means that



we're sometimes not sure how to structure our response. When this happens, a really good safety net, a kind of fallback, is to simply take each question that is asked (or each part of the prompt) and write one paragraph that directly answers, and fully answers, that part or question. We may be able to add in an introduction or conclusion—but we may simply go in parts, answering each part as we go, and that will be sufficient.

For instance, let's consider the fourth-grade prompt from 2010:

Imagine if the girl in "Butterfly House" had found a tadpole instead of a butterfly. What would the girl have done to take care of the tadpole? Do you think it's more interesting to take care of a butterfly or a tadpole?

One way you can show your writers how to do this work is to simply do everything the test writers say. Ask children to read the test prompt and identify the number of questions that have been asked. In this prompt they've asked two specific questions—tell children that they will want to devote a paragraph each to answering these. Teach children that they can't ignore any question in the prompt but must answer them all, *in the order that they've been asked*. Once writers have the two paragraphs down, they might think of a very brief introduction—but this is not crucial. Instead, it is more pressing that you teach children to be attentive to leaving no part of the prompt unattended or unanswered. Provide children practice with a variety of prompts, for example:

Imagine that you have gone to look for gold during the Gold Rush. What hardships might you face? What good things might come from your search? Do you think it was worth it to search for gold during the Gold Rush?

Your students must be able to point out that three specific questions have been asked and that their corresponding essays must have at least three paragraphs, one per question. One possible danger of telling kids to just answer the question is that they might not include any evidence from one of the texts because the specific parts of the prompt won't lead them to this crucial work. Your teaching point might be: "Writers, as we look at the questions we'll be answering, we can go back to the texts and put a star in the margin or underline or circle the parts of the texts we're going to use as evidence for each question. Here's a trick! We have to use some evidence from both texts. So we need to try to make sure we've starred something in each text."

You will want to actively demonstrate how you do this and set children up to do this work in partnerships, either by using a shared writing experience or by letting partners rehearse by starring or underlining their evidence and sharing how they'll get to evidence from both texts. You'll want to teach children that even though they're simply answering the questions or parts of the prompt, they can still add a conclusion to their essays. They either provide a one-line insight gleaned from answering the

prompt questions (*It seems like tadpoles would be a lot harder to care for than butterflies*) and perhaps add in a personal response (*But either would be fun! "Butterfly House" and "From Tadpole to Frog" make me want to raise a pet. I'd love to have a pet, and I would take good care of it like this girl does. Maybe I could even ask my grandfather to help me*). If you teach children the latter, teach them also to keep such a response brief—the last thing you want is for the angle of the essay to shift into a personal one.

## Part Four: Celebrating Progress at the End of a Month of Essays

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By the end of the month, your young essayists will be able to think and write according to a variety of essay structures. One way to celebrate all the work they've done this month is for children to publish their folders full of essay drafts. These folders, by now, will have become more than receptacles. Their contents—probably a dozen flash drafts of various types of essays—are likely to represent an arc of development, like mini-growth portfolios. Many teachers have found it exceptionally powerful to have students review their own progress across a month. If you choose to send children along a reflective journey looking at the various essays they've written this month, you might ask them to begin by organizing the essays in their folders. You might distribute a few separator sheets, asking them to separate the four kinds of essays they've worked on in this month in chronological order, adding dates and perhaps a table of contents.

There are various ways of looking at these portfolios. For instance, "How easily can you identify the type of essay you've written just by glancing at the format and use of transitions?" Or you might say, "Look at your first few drafts and compare them with the essays you wrote toward the end of the month. What new things are you doing toward the end that you weren't doing at the start?" Partners might study each other's portfolios and write little notes of appreciation for specific things they see in each other's work. If you want to mine the portfolios for even more teaching potential, you might involve the whole class in developing a simple rubric through which they self-assess the essay(s) they think is (are) their best work. Alternately, students may prepare a small presentation of their portfolios for a partner, a small group of peers, or a wider audience, presenting the various formats and revision strategies this month of learning has encompassed.



## UNIT EIGHT

# Informational Writing

## *Reading, Research, and Writing in the Content Areas*

### MAY

This unit is a culmination of all the informational writing students have been working on throughout the year, from the informational book unit to the writing included in the Content-Area Curriculum Calendar. Students have been busy this year learning how to construct and write engaging information books. Students have gone on a journey in the content areas, learning how to use writing to explore, learn, and make meaning with new content. Students have a foundation in using sketching as a tool for thinking about new content and using timelines to organize information. Writers have learned different ways to write about information, from summarizing, to comparing and contrasting, to ranking and prioritizing information. This unit is an important opportunity for repeated practice of these writing moves with the intent to move students toward proficiency. However, this unit is also a time to put all of this year's work together. It is designed to give students the space to put all these writing moves together to create one large product. This month, students will use writing workshop to write and produce research reports, expressing their understanding of the new content they are learning during reading workshop.

During reading workshop this month, your children will read widely about a content-area topic. For instance, if you are teaching fourth grade in New York, this means that you are probably studying the American Revolution, immigration, and government systems in social studies. But whether you are teaching fourth or fifth grade, and whatever content you will be in at this time, this write-up will help you develop a rich cross-disciplinary unit. It will give you and your students time (that precious commodity!) to delve deeply into content, to read across many texts that address your topics, and to write about them with engagement, purpose, and more sophistication than earlier in the year.

You will have gathered all sorts of nonfiction materials—expository nonfiction, narrative nonfiction, maps, primary documents, digital texts, and even images. Your students will be engaged in partnerships or clubs reading about this content. They'll have time to talk to one another to deepen their understanding and grow ideas. They'll mark interesting parts of the book with thoughts and reactions, ready to share with friends. As readers, they are also able to read and understand a wider array of nonfiction books: narrative nonfiction that takes the reader through a timeline of historical events, expository nonfiction (information and all-about) that teaches all about a topic, and question-and-answer books that invite the reader to wonder alongside the author. The writing inside these books and texts will serve as writing mentors, providing writers with a wealth of mentoring opportunities around authorial choices, craft moves, and publishing possibilities.

In addition to reading these texts to learn content, students will read as researchers, specifically with the intent to gather important information and parlay it into their own research reports. These reports are similar to information books in that they present information about a topic of expertise. They are different, though, because research reports present information in a format more reminiscent of an essay structure, rather than a book format. Research reports contain information separated into sections, potentially with headings, and have diagrams or text boxes containing supplemental information. Some of you may envision your students using publishing software, such as Microsoft Publisher, to create visually compelling reports. Others might envision a research project where students echo more of the work being done in the content-area reading unit. Some of you may feel students need another round of informational book writing and might choose to design this unit around another exposure to that form of publication.

This is an informational or expository writing unit. In whichever form children choose to publish their findings, this unit is first and foremost about students using writing to teach others about what they learn in the content area. It would be easy for this unit to take the form of a research report or project, that is, the actual writing work of the unit could potentially be secondary to the physical report or project. You'll want to keep in mind, therefore, that this research report helps meet all the writing demands for the CCSS's informational standards. These writing standards require students to construct informative or explanatory texts that examine a topic and to convey ideas and information clearly. Specifically, it's important for students to introduce a topic clearly and to group related information into paragraphs and sections. This includes formatting such as headings or illustrations. When writing these texts, students are expected to develop the topic with facts, definitions, concrete details, quotations, or examples. Students can link ideas within categories of information using words and phrases such as *another*, *for example*, or *because*. The use of precise language or content-specific vocabulary is required, as well as a concluding statement or section. This reminder helps ground this unit in writing work essential to creating sophisticated and grade-level research reports.

In the first part, children will be studying a whole-class topic during reading workshop and will be reading a lot of texts across the whole-class topic like the Civil War or the American Revolution. Students will concentrate on gathering information and laying a firm foundation for understanding the new content. In the second part, while they are reading to learn about more specific parts of their topic, they will be using writing to expand their content-area knowledge. They'll write longer about initial notes and observations they've made, question new knowledge they've learned, or generate new ideas. The third part will be the most intensive writing portion of the unit, as students pore over the notes they've taken and figure out ways to piece together different aspects of their reports. You'll want to support children as they look closely at mentor texts, write, and rewrite different portions of their reports. For instance, as the class is functioning as a research community on, say, the Civil War, students will branch off and construct more specific reports on the trials and tribulations of the Underground Railroad. In the final part, students will revise and publish their reports. The unit will culminate with an opportunity for children to share their research and celebrate their writing.

## Preparing for This Unit

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In preparation for this unit, remember the information book writing students did earlier in the year. Students wrote from an area of expertise, with little or no research. Students presented information in categories and subcategories, incorporating text features for a variety of purposes. Many of you had an instructional focus on writing craft, elaboration, and revision. Some of you chose to provide opportunities for children to embed narratives within the expository structure. When preparing for this unit, you'll make important decisions about how children's writing work from past units will inform and elevate the work of this unit.

The goal of this unit is to write informative or explanatory texts, where writers compose a piece of writing that explains and presents information and ideas in a manner that demonstrates an understanding of the topic. Not only is this type of writing detailed in the Common Core State Standards, it is also highlighted by NAEP, the National Assessment of Educational Progress. NAEP is the largest nationally representative continuing assessment of what America's students know and can do in various subject areas. NAEP brings awareness to the fact that throughout the K–12 curriculum, writing to explain is the most commonly assigned communicative purpose. Students write summaries, research reports, and other kinds of explanatory tasks in all of their school subjects. This furthers the rationale to end the year strongly by teaching this important type of writing. Students will be expected to write in this way many, many times throughout their academic lives. This unit provides the opportunity to learn this type of writing and learn it well.

For those of you using the Content-Area Curriculum Calendar, your children have probably learned content in a variety of ways during social studies workshop all year.

They've likely engaged in long conversations generated by fascinating picture books, like *Molly Bannaky*. They've talked about what it must have been like to live during that time and about their reactions to what was fair and unfair. They've watched video clips, guided by you, in which they stopped to turn and talk, role-play, or watch you think aloud. They've pored over countless primary sources—photographs, woodblock prints, maps, and timelines—and used these to grow ideas and talk to their partners. They've listened to mini-lectures you've given where you clearly taught big ideas and the facts that support those ideas.

The social studies content you choose for this month should be a highly engaging one. You'll likely align this unit to your district's Scope and Sequence. You'll want to choose a topic for which you have many, many resources: books, videos, primary documents. You'll want to be sure that your whole class can study many subtopics within the main topic, so you'll want to ask yourself, "Does this topic have *breadth*?" Instead of doing a month-long study of just the battles of the American Revolution, for example, you'll likely want to broaden the topic. This way, children could also study the dress of the time period and what life was like for those who were not fighting. They could compare different kinds of colonies, events leading up to the Revolutionary War, leadership during the time, and so on.

This month, it's essential that you continue keeping up a strong reading and content-area workshop, for children can only write about new learning if they've truly learned something new. Flood your children with images, facts, and stories about the time period of study. Even better, begin the work of the content-area reading unit a week or two *before* launching this writing unit so they'll begin on Day One with lots and lots to say. As your researchers become knowledgeable, they'll be eager to share what they've learned and the ideas they have about all the new information they have. Students will, then, begin to turn their research into a writing project, or you can imagine small-group or class-wide projects. Again, it would be helpful to reference our companion content-area reading unit for May when planning this unit to seize opportunities for overlap. These units are symbiotic and designed to overlap.

You will want to consider the following questions:

- What's the topic of study? What will my whole class be learning about? What are the choices for students within that larger topic?
- What materials do I have and need to serve as writing mentors, and what do I have to teach the content?
- When will I begin this unit to ensure that children know enough about the content before they write about it?
- Will my students be working in pairs, small groups, or independently to create their final piece?



## Part One: Writing to Develop Expertise and Grow Ideas in Reading or Content-Area Workshop

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Your job in the weeks leading up to the launch of this writing unit, and in the first week or two of the unit, will be to teach your children a lot about the topic of study. You might want to set up a special place for this collection of information, sketching, and writing to be housed. Perhaps it's a social studies folder that they decorate with a picture of themselves as a historian or person of the time period on the cover. Perhaps it's just a tabbed section in their already established social studies notebook or writer's notebook.

Decide if you want children forming groups around one topic of inquiry or whether you want each child to survey the whole topic, gaining broad knowledge, before zeroing in on one to study with more depth. For example, if you are choosing to study the colonial and revolutionary periods as a whole-class topic, you might steer the class into groups that study subtopics. You could offer ideas for subtopics that are guided by your content standards—for example, life in the colonies; comparing New England, middle and southern colonies, and Europe. You could also think about the social studies thematic strands and have children choose one of those: culture; time, continuity, and change; people, places, and environments; individual development and identity; individuals, groups, and institutions; power, authority, and governance; production, distribution, and consumption; science, technology, and society; global connections; civic ideas and responsibility. Children might individually choose their own subtopic that they derive from reading and thinking broadly during writing workshop. Whichever way you choose, this compartmentalization of topics and subtopics helps students see the relationship between two or more ideas or concepts in a historical context (which the Common Core State Standards refer to in the *key ideas and details* standard). This overall setup and organization are echoed in the companion content-area reading unit.

### *In Writing Workshop*

As the unit begins, you will immerse your children in all the different ways that they can write about what they are learning in the reading or content-area workshop. You will want to teach them that social scientists write in many ways for many purposes. During this first week of the unit, their purpose for writing will be to capture what they are learning, thinking, and writing to grow their ideas. Therefore, you will probably teach them that their notebooks are collections of many kinds of writing.

One kind of writing is observational writing—they will record in extreme detail all that they observed while studying a primary document or drawing from the time period. During social studies workshop, they may have observed and sketched. During writing workshop, you teach how they can go back to those sketches and observations and write in words, phrases, sentences, and even paragraphs about what they

have seen and sketched. Teach them that they can use prompts like “I notice . . . I see . . . This reminds me of. . . .” One way to ensure your children are doing this writing in as much detail as possible is to teach them to remember the thinking skills of a social scientist: considering cause and effect, comparing and contrasting, evaluating, drawing inferences. When social scientists write observations, they want their reader to be able to picture what they are writing about, so they try to write about every little tiny thing they see, using the most precise words they possibly can. They also add what it feels like, right down to the smallest detail.

Another kind of writing is sketching with labels and captions—during social studies workshop, they may have drawn a striking image from one of their books and then labeled it using precise vocabulary. In writing workshop, they could add captions that explain the image in greater detail. It is conceivable that some students feeling full of the energy and enthusiasm of discovery will add a few words to one sketch and then move on to another and another. Therefore, it is important to teach them that historians (and writers!) linger. This means teaching them to add all that they can add to their sketches, in both words and images.

You may also want to teach children some discrete strategies for note-taking. They may learn to take notes as boxes and bullets, recording a main idea and supporting facts. You may teach them to read a chunk of text and think “What is the most important part of this? What facts support that important part?” You may teach them to keep their topic of inquiry in mind, if they have decided on one at this point, and return to their book for notes. They’ll be using a table of contents and an index to find sections in a text to reread and take notes on what they’re rereading. All the while, they’ll take notes on cards, Post-its, or small pieces of paper that can later be sorted and organized. The size of the piece of paper or card will help to ensure that they aren’t recopying sections from the book but instead jotting quick notes about what they’ve learned.

If social scientists simply put their diagrams and observations into the book without any other writing, the people reading the books would probably be left wondering, “What does this mean? What does the writer think about all this stuff?” Teach students to help their future readers by writing their ideas that accompany the research they’ve begun to collect in their notebooks. Teach students to develop their ideas by asking themselves, “What do I think about this?” or “What is important about this?” and then write it down. That way, when someone reads their writing, he or she won’t be left wondering, “What does this mean?”

Social scientists may write an annotated timeline. They take notes about events that happened in sequence. On the top of the timeline, they might record facts about what happened and the date it happened. Below, they might annotate this timeline with their own thoughts or ideas. You can imagine the student making a map of Harriet Tubman’s journeys in her notebook, or a map of the main paths of the Underground Railroad and Harriet’s stops on it, or a timeline of her escapes, or even a quick sketch of the plantation she escaped from. The main point of this kind of writing is that it is quick, and its purpose is to synthesize information and ideas as you read, in order to get ready to write.

## Part Two: Writing to Develop a Research Base of Knowledge and to Deepen Our Expertise in a Topic in Reading or Content-Area Workshop

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It is important that you continue a strong reading and/or content-area workshop because the work during that time is the fuel for what children write in writing workshop. At this point in the unit, students will most likely be breaking up into different categories or subtopics, taking on a specific angle to your whole-class study. The experience of the whole-class research community in the previous part will support students' independence in smaller research groups. These smaller research groups help meet the demands of the Common Core State Standards for speaking and listening, which ask students to engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly. During these conversations, students will come to discussions prepared, having read materials they can explicitly draw on as they explore ideas under discussion. It will be helpful for students to write in their special notebooks or folders, collecting their thoughts, questions, and ideas to bring to their group. Smokey Daniels describes some of this in *Subjects Matter*, which may be a helpful resource for you. He encourages students to trade notebooks once a week and write to each other in their notebooks, responding to each other's research, reflections, and ideas. As a whole class across these next weeks, your children will continue to listen to read-alouds, watch videos, even take field trips.

### *In Writing Workshop*

In this second part, while students are reading to learn about more specific parts of their topic, they will be using writing to expand their content-area knowledge. They'll write longer about initial notes and observations they made, question new knowledge they've acquired, or generate new ideas. Students will need to begin to fuel their own research. One way to do this is to generate questions and pursue a line of thinking. Questions that begin with *what* or *when* lead researchers to quick answers that clarify information. Questions that begin with *why* or *how* lead researchers on a longer pursuit to answer the question. For instance, initially students might ask, "When did the Underground Railroad begin?" and move on to question, "How did slaves learn the safe codes to use while traveling toward freedom?"

Additionally, historians often use their notebooks to question and wonder. Because it is important that children continue to write with volume and stamina, you will also want to teach them to try to hypothesize answers to these musings. You could imagine kids saying things like, "I wonder why . . ." or "How come . . . ?" Teach kids to catch these thoughts by quickly jotting them in their notebooks. Then teach them to think through possible answers by using prompts such as "Maybe . . ." "Could it be . . . ?" "But what about . . . ?" or "The best explanation is . . ." For example, a child might

look at a picture in a book about Colonial America. The picture shows a woman raking or hoeing in the field. Three other females—another adult and two children—are in the background on their knees, also tending to crops. The caption reads, “Everyone in the family pitched in to help with the chores.” The child might write in her notebook:

I notice in the picture that there are four women working in the field. It looks like the field is right next to their house. It makes me think this is their own private garden. It’s not very big; it might be that the food that they grow there is just for them and their family. The caption says that the whole family pitches in to help with the chores. But I only see girls and women in the picture. It could be that the women and girls had different chores than the men had. I’m surprised that a woman’s chore would be tending to the garden, though. From what I already knew, I think of their chores as being things like sewing and cooking. I’ll be interested to learn more about that.

As the unit progresses, you will notice that your children are beginning to have more developed thoughts, ideas, and opinions about the class study. Congratulate your students on figuring out the value of writing to think about their topic. Here you might want to teach kids that historians not only write about what they observed but also write about what they think about these observations. Therefore, you might teach kids to look back over the writing they’ve collected in their notebooks and to write long about what they are thinking or realizing. These entries might begin with “I know some things about . . .” and continue with examples: “One thing I know. . . . Another thing I know. . . .” This could then lead into some writing to think, “This makes me realize. . . .” “This helps me understand. . . .” or “I used to think . . . but now I know. . . . My thinking changed because. . . .”

This is a good time to either remind or teach students to make their own graphic organizers and develop their own systems for jotting as they read. They’ll probably begin by putting Post-its on the texts they are reading. Then they can turn to their notebooks, and this is a good time to review the boxes-and-bullets structure of:

Idea
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- Example
- Example
- Example

Some of the students’ books will naturally be organized like this as ideas and examples, and they can use the headings and subheadings to guide their note-taking.

Often, however, they'll need to read over the text, think about the idea they have about this section, and then organize their notes with their original ideas and examples they carefully selected from the text. Later these will make good ordinate and subordinate sections for their research report. You may also teach your students to write full sentences and paragraphs in their notebooks, structured along the same lines as the boxes and bullets—almost like mini-essays, with an idea and evidence and perhaps some reflection. For instance, you can model writing a notebook entry that sounds like:

I think Harriet Tubman is amazing because she was so brave. For instance, they tracked her with dogs and teams of men who wanted to capture her. They would track her for miles and miles, and she had to walk in streams and run at night. She was also brave because they did capture her, and she always escaped again. I can hardly imagine being caught and then waiting for the moment to sneak out again.

Teach your students to write reflections, where they look over their notes and write entries describing their new understandings and their emotions about what they learn—what they find upsetting, what they admire, and so on. This is where they will be developing their own ideas about what they read and putting those ideas into lots of words. Teach them to use the sentence starters you used for essays earlier in the year, such as *Some people think, but I think; in other words; another way to say this is. . .*

You may see some of your students struggling to use accurate research practices to cite and reference in their writing. Some students struggle to determine which information is important to note and write down for later use. Teach students the strategy of looking across their notes and listing, for example, the three most important parts about what they are studying. For instance, if students have been reading about the Underground Railroad, they might say that Harriet Tubman, the struggles the slaves faced, and the new opportunities awaiting them were three important parts. Then teach students to use these categories as filters, using them as guides for gathering important research. Some teachers find it helpful to put these three or more categories on index cards so that children can reread texts or their notes using the index cards like a bookmark, stopping to copy important information on the cards.

You'll also want to teach students to prioritize the research they gather, determining which research is most important to include. You might take this opportunity to remind students of the ranking strategy work they learned earlier in the year. Remind them that using *-er* words (*bigger, lesser, greater, smaller*) is a helpful way to determine importance and prioritize information. Imagine students working with their research clubs, holding lists of facts and examples, asking each other, "Which had the *larger* effect? What had the *lesser* impact on . . . ? Who had the *greater* influence on . . . ?" Other key words, like *most* or *least*, are helpful to incorporate into conversation or writing when prioritizing information. Students can use phrases like *most influential* or *least effective* in order to sift through research deciding which points to refer to in their later writing.

You'll want to seize this opportunity to teach children to cite research correctly, showing them how to incorporate research and put it in their own words. When practicing paraphrasing, you might find it helpful for students to write the research fact on one side of an index card and then rewrite it on the other side of the card from memory. Or perhaps you use the structure of the research club and have students play a form of written "Telephone game." One student might write a research example he wants to paraphrase at the top of his notebook and pass it around to other members of the club, where each student reworks the example by replacing verbs, adding descriptive words or phrases, or reworking the sentence. Of course, you'll teach into preserving the accuracy of the information. For instance, you might model reworking the research example:

Harriet Tubman is perhaps the most well-known of all the Underground Railroad's "conductors." During a ten-year span she made 19 trips into the South and escorted over 300 slaves to freedom.

into

Harriet Tubman is maybe the most famous of all the Underground Railroad's guides. Over ten years, Tubman traveled 19 times into the South to accompany more than 300 slaves to freedom.

### Part Three: Studying Mentors and Writing Drafts of Research Reports in Writing Workshop

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This third part is the intensive writing portion of the unit, where students pore over the notes they've taken and figure out ways to piece together different aspects of their reports. Students will be looking closely at mentors and writing many potential parts of their reports on an aspect of the whole-class study.

Students will need mentors as they are drafting their research reports. At first, it might feel as though you have little to no samples available for your students, especially as you probably don't have a bin in your library labeled "Research Reports." First, you'll have your own demonstration writing. Second, the TCRWP reading series has many sample nonfiction articles on the accompanying CD-ROM to use as mentor texts. Third, you can access sites like *Time for Kids* for sample articles or reports. Lastly, the nonfiction and content-area books that line the shelves of your libraries include incredibly rich and valuable samples of writing that students can use as mentors. Just think of the pages that include lots of information categorized with headings, tables, or text boxes. Your goal is to collect many texts that can serve as models for what your children will make, not to collect all books about the topic of study. You might even give writing mentor texts about topics that are very different from what your children will write about so that they cannot copy the content but instead are inspired by the layout, structure, and craft of the books.



Remind your children of their learning from the year: often expository nonfiction is divided up into chapters, each with its own subtopic. To make a research report like this, the writer probably learned a lot about the topic, collecting facts and ideas and then organizing those ideas into categories. Or instead, the writer might have learned a lot about the topic, thought of categories, and then searched for specific facts to fit into those categories. You might also draw from some work they've done writing about nonfiction, showing them how some sections take on a compare-and-contrast format, others a cause-and-effect format. You'll help your children to see that nonfiction is detailed with specific words about the topic and partner sentences that explain, define, and teach the reader.

It will be very important to be reading aloud, doing shared reading, and doing shared writing of nonfiction. Reading like a writer and writing as a whole class will serve as students' immersion in what they'll write and will serve as a reminder of how to use mentors. For example, you could make an overhead of two sections from a nonfiction text or place them on your whiteboard and have the whole class read the pages together. You could ask your children questions, leading them to notice aspects of the how the parts are structured and about the kinds of information they find. You could ask them to talk about how they think a writer might have made this particular page, with this particular kind of writing. All the while, you can be making charts that serve as "directions" for how to make the different sections that will form their research reports. A chart could have a Xerox of a page with arrows labeling the different parts or sections. Then, during shared writing, you may show your children how to use the resources—mentor texts, charts—to make that kind of writing.

All the while you'll also remind students that their notebooks are valuable resources filled with their thoughts, wonderings, observations, and conclusions. They could look back at what they've already written and use it not only for inspiration but also for elaboration. Or they could take detailed drawings or diagrams that they created in their notebooks and cut them out and tape them to new pages, adding lines of text on the bottom of the pages. You might teach children to look back to their detailed drawings in order to write more on the page or teach them to go back to a sentence where they wrote a vocabulary word that might be new for their readers and try to write another sentence to support it, defining what it means. Other children would benefit from thinking about how to elaborate on other parts of pages, like the captions or labels. To decide what to teach in these few days, it would be helpful to look at your children's writing to see what they are already doing and teach them some new ways to elaborate.

Writing partners will help students move toward more independence and away from depending on you for content and writing feedback. You might teach a lesson about how to use a writing partner to give ideas for what information would be helpful to include. You can teach your children how to use their partners as sounding boards, asking them, "Did that make sense?" or "Do you feel like there is anything missing?" or "What questions do you still have about my topic after you read that page?" Later, you might ask children to read each other's work, making sure what they've written makes sense.

If you find that some of your children are including more information on each section than what fits their topics, you might teach children to read back over what they have, making sure to stay focused on what the sections are about.

## **Part Four: Revising, Editing, and Publishing to Get Ready to Teach Others in Writing Workshop**

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At this point in the unit, many of your children have drafted many, many sections in a variety of structures. In this final week, you will want to rally their passion and purpose in studying history toward sharing what they have learned with others. First, you will teach them to lay out all the writing they have done and choose the best parts to turn into a research report. They will take those pieces and will revise, edit, and publish to share at the celebration. You might teach them to choose by thinking about their audience and asking, “Would others be interested in reading about this?” Then you will teach them to return to their mentors, reading closely to notice the details and subtlety within a given structure. You will definitely want to help kids notice and then try revision techniques again—things like partner sentences (after writing one sentence about something, writing two or more), sequencing (going from main idea to supporting details), vocabulary (using specific words that match the class study), and extra sections of charts (adding diagrams, timelines, captions, front covers, back covers, and blurbs). It’s okay, and probable, that you will be reteaching some of the same lessons you taught earlier.

Since these are informational texts that children have authored this month, you might remind them to check to see if each of their paragraphs has a clear topic sentence and whether the boxes-and-bullets structure is clear to the reader. Model how you might split one paragraph into two smaller paragraphs to make each present a distinct idea. Ask writers to revise their headings and subheadings. Urge them to ponder, “Would a new subheading help the reader understand this part of the text more fully? Would a table of contents benefit the reader?” You’ll also want to alert writers to the diagrams they might have included in the text. Ask them to revise these diagrams, looking over carefully to ensure there are adequate captions and labels that explain each diagram clearly to the reader. “Does the diagram explain or connect to the text on that page?” children might ask themselves. “Would this diagram work better for another portion of the text? Should I shift it there?”

Part of the revision process might include inserting new text features to give more clarity to the writing. Suggest that writers insert a text box or two if their readers might benefit from knowing an extra fact. Demonstrate how they might choose a title and a cover illustration for their research report. Before they begin their final edit for spelling and punctuation, ask writers to think, “Is this report teaching the reader about my topic in a clear way? What can I do to make my teaching even clearer?” Guide students to revise for focus or cohesion. All the parts of the report should not feel disjointed but should blend together or build on each other.

Writers might consider whether they want their piece to have a slant or angle or if they want to include their own or others' perspectives on just one part, like the introduction. Using what they know about analytical writing from previous units, they might return to some of the informational writing and elaborate by providing perspective.

As the unit draws to a close, it will be important to remind your young historians that they've already learned so much about how to fix up their writing for publication—capitalization, beginning and ending punctuation, and limits on the use of *and* in any given sentence. You can teach kids to edit their work by rereading it to make sure it all makes sense, crossing out and adding parts as necessary. Kids can check their writing for frequently misspelled words and spelling patterns they have been working on, all by themselves.

Finally, to fancy up the pieces for publishing, kids might use real photographs just like many informational texts. They might also add more details as well as color to their pictures and diagrams. Kids might also make important vocabulary bold or underline it.

Some classrooms may prefer, especially if this teaching is contained within your social studies block, for students to share their new understandings in projects. This might include acting out important scenes (narrating why this moment is important in American history), having a symposium on the issues of the Revolution and formation of government that still affect us today, or using films, picture books, and articles to compare the American Revolution to others that have happened around the world.



## UNIT NINE

# Historical Fiction or Fantasy Fiction

## JUNE

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**F**or this month, we suggest that you teach the genre of fiction that you did not choose in January. The write-ups and teaching points for both historical fiction and fantasy fiction writing can be found in Unit Five of this curricular calendar. If you do choose to teach either of these at this time, you may want to opt for the parallel unit in reading workshop, rather than the Author Study. However, you might decide to stay with the Author Study, in which case you would want to make sure to angle that unit so that you are giving your students opportunities to get to know mentor texts and genre conventions in the genre that you're teaching in writing workshop.

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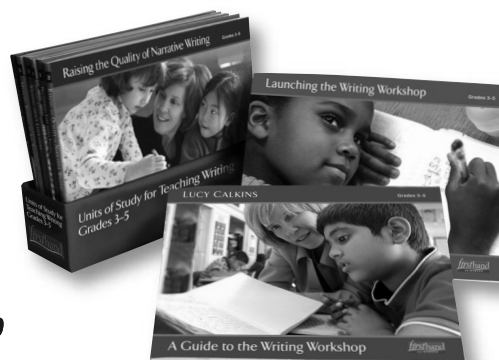
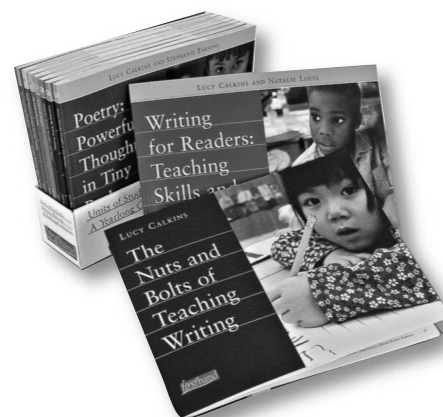
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